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ABSTRACT

The charter-schools movement provides the opportunity to observe whether granting schools freedom from most state regulations actually produces more freedom for school administrators and teachers, and whether this autonomy produces other distinctive outcomes. This report summarizes findings of Southwest Regional Laboratory's (SWRL's) statewide survey of California charter schools. During 1994-95, 54 administrators and 230 teachers returned questionnaires that had been mailed to the 66 charter schools operating in California at the time. Survey responses were also received from 46 principals of noncharter (comparison) schools in California and 63 charter schools across the United States. Data are presented on school characteristics, institutional autonomy, educational innovation, teacher characteristics and effectiveness, and access to education. High-autonomy schools more often reported greater freedom and less cooperative relationships with unions; fewer purchasing restrictions and more money for instruction; more parent participation; and more at-risk students. Compared to their counterparts in regular schools, charter-school teachers reported that they had more influence but heavier workloads. Teachers in new charters were the least secure about their jobs but were among the most satisfied with their jobs. The most common innovations were related to instructional strategies, site-based governance, and parental participation. The data indicate that, as a group, charter schools do not select the most able, privileged students, nor do they exclude those who have been traditionally underserved. However, some evidence suggests that, in comparison to other schools, charter schools tend to skim students who come from low-income families, have below-average test scores; and qualify for special education, and/or they tend to select students from privileged families. Certain types of charter schools are less accessible than others to underserved, at-risk children. A total of 43 figures and 15 tables are included. (Contains 45 references.) (LMI)

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# Freedom and Innovation in California's Charter Schools

Ronald G. Corwin and John F. Flaherty, Editors
Southwest Regional Laboratory
1995

EA 027296

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# Freedom and Innovation In California's Charter Schools

*Ronald G. Corwin and John F. Flaherty, Editors*
*Southwest Regional Laboratory*

**November 1995**

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The Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL) is a nonprofit, public educational agency that exists to address challenges resulting from changing demographics and increasing numbers of at-risk children in the metropolitan Pacific Southwest. The Laboratory addresses its mission by engaging in research, development, evaluation, training, technical assistance, and policy analysis.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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We sincerely hope the information offered here will prove useful to the countless individuals who are responsible for shaping and implementing the charter school movement in California and throughout the United States.

# CONTENTS

**LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS** xi

**STUDY HIGHLIGHTS** *xiii*
  School Autonomy *xiii*
  Teacher Characteristics *xv*
  Innovations *xvii*
  Parent Involvement *xviii*
  Parent Contracts *xix*
  Student Characteristics *xx*

**INTRODUCTION** 1

**CHAPTER 1: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS**
**What Kinds of Schools Were Studied?** 3
  *Ronald G. Corwin and John Flaherty, Southwest Regional Laboratory*
  Procedures 3
  School Parameters 7
  Summary and Discussion 15

**CHAPTER 2: SCHOOL AUTONOMY**
**How Much Freedom Do Charter Schools Have?** 17
  *Ronald G. Corwin, Southwest Regional Laboratory*
  The Balance of Control Within Districts 17
  Distinctive Features of Charter Schools 25
  Comparisons Between High-Autonomy and Low-Autonomy Charter Schools 33
  Summary and Discussion 39

**CHAPTER 3: TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS**
**Who Teaches in Charter Schools?** 43
  *Marcella Dianda, Southwest Regional Laboratory*
  Characteristics of Charter School Teachers 43
  How Teachers Assess Their Professional Lives 48
  Classroom Practices 53
  Summary and Discussion 59

**CHAPTER 4: INNOVATIONS**
**What Are the Schools Doing?** 63
  *John Flaherty, Southwest Regional Laboratory*
  The Context 63
  Findings 64
  Summary and Discussion 73

**CHAPTER 5: PARENT INVOLVEMENT**
**How Do Parents Participate?** 75
  *Ronald G. Corwin, Southwest Regional Laboratory, and*
  *Henry J. Becker, University of California, Irvine*
  The Importance of Parent Involvement 75
  Parent Participation in Charter Schools 77
  Parent Influence in Charter Schools 83
  Summary and Discussion 87

**CHAPTER 6: PARENT CONTRACTS**
**Do They Exclude Students? 89**
*Kathryn Nakagawa, University of California, Irvine, and*
*Ronald G. Corwin, Southwest Regional Laboratory*
- Characteristics of Parent Contracts 89
- Parent Involvement and Student Selectivity 96
- Summary and Discussion 102

**CHAPTER 7: STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS**
**Are Charter Schools Elitist? 105**
*Ronald G. Corwin and John Flaherty, Southwest Regional Laboratory*
- Background 105
- Analysis 111
- Summary and Discussion 124

**REFERENCES 131**

# TABLES

**Table 1** Characteristics of the Samples 4
**Table 2** Selected Characteristics of California Charter Schools 7
**Table 3** Comparisons Among States With Charters, on Selected School Parameters 9
**Table 4** How Much Freedom Does Your Charter School Now Have, Compared to Other Schools in Your District? 18
**Table 5** Charter School Teachers' Academic Degrees, and Teaching Credentials and Certificates 44
**Table 6** Charter School Teachers' Experience 46
**Table 7** Charter School Teachers' Reports of the Professional Climate in Charter Schools 52
**Table 8** Percentage of Teachers Saying They Now Use Each Practice More/Much More 54
**Table 9** How Essential or Valuable Is the Charter Structure for Changed Teaching Practices? 57
**Table 10** Percentage of Charter Schools Using Each Type of Approach 65
**Table 11** Percentage of Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools Implementing Each Type of Innovation 67
**Table 12** Implementation Status of Various Innovations 69
**Table 13** Importance of Charter Status in Achieving Innovations 70
**Table 14** Percentage of Schools With High and Low Autonomy Implementing Each Innovation 72
**Table 15** Is There Evidence of Elitism? 127

# FIGURES

**Figure 1** Enrollment, Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 11
**Figure 2** Student-Teacher Ratios and Full-/Part-Time Teachers: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 12
**Figure 3** Credentialed Teachers and "Local Residents with Special Expertise": Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 13
**Figure 4** Level of Control Exercised by Schools and Districts 19
**Figure 5** Percentage of Schools That Fully Control Program Areas 21
**Figure 6** Percentage of Districts That Fully Control Program Areas 22

**Figure 7** Level of School District Cooperation With Requests From Schools for More Control 24
**Figure 8** Current Relationships With Local Teachers' Unions, District Administration, and School Boards: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 25
**Figure 9** The Most Distinctive Features Identified by the Administrators of Charter Schools and of Comparison Schools 26
**Figure 10** Financial and Legal Characteristics: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 28
**Figure 11** Teacher Roles: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 30
**Figure 12** Curriculum and Instruction: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 32
**Figure 13** Characteristics of Charter Schools With High and Low Levels of Autonomy 36
**Figure 14** Differences in Percentage of Charter Schools With High and Low Levels of Autonomy 37
**Figure 15** Selected Qualifications of Charter School Teachers 45
**Figure 16** Selected Roles of Charter School Teachers 49
**Figure 17** Charter School Teachers' Autonomy 50
**Figure 18** Charter School Teachers' Satisfaction 51
**Figure 19** Charter School Teachers' Perceptions of School Climate 53
**Figure 20** Charter School Teachers' Classroom Practices 58
**Figure 21** Charter School Teachers' Perceptions of Their Students 59
**Figure 22** Percentage of Schools in Which at Least 25% of the Parents Have Participated in Consumer Roles: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 79
**Figure 23** Percentage of Schools in Which at Least 25% of the Parents Have Participated in Implementor Roles: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 80
**Figure 24** Teacher Practices for Increasing Parent Involvement at Home: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 81
**Figure 25** School Activities To Support Parent Involvement: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 82
**Figure 26** Parent Voting Turnout: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 84
**Figure 27** Parent Input and Influence: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 85
**Figure 28** Role of Parents on Governing Board: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 87
**Figure 29** Parent Provisions in Contracts With and Without Failure-to-Comply Clause 95
**Figure 30** School and Teacher Practices To Improve Parent Involvement in Charter Schools That Use and Do No Use Parent Contracts 96

**Figure 31** Selected Populations Served by Charter Schools Using Parent Contracts That Do Not Include a Failure-to-Comply Clause 97
**Figure 32** Importance of Selected Factors in Admitting Students to Charter Schools 99
**Figure 33** Administrators' Perceptions of Parent Participation: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 101
**Figure 34** Selected Populations Served by Charter Schools That Do and Do Not Use Parent Contracts 102
**Figure 35** Percentage of Students From Racial or Ethnic Minorities: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 112
**Figure 36** Percentage of Students Qualifying for Free/Reduced Meals: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 114
**Figure 37** Percentage of Students Residing With Professional Families: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 115
**Figure 38** Percentage of Students Who Are LEP: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 116
**Figure 39** Percentage of Students One or More Years Above National Norms: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 118
**Figure 40** Percentage of Students One or More Years Below National Norms: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 119
**Figure 41** Percentage of Students Who Have Been Retained in Grade at Least Once: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 121
**Figure 42** Percentage of Students Who Are Current or Former Dropouts: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 122
**Figure 43** Percentage of Students Qualifying for Special Education Placement: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools 123

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# STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

During winter 1994-95, 54 administrators and 230 teachers returned questionnaires that were mailed to the 66 charter schools operating in California at the time. In addition, 46 principals of non-charter schools the students would have attended if not enrolled in a charter school returned similar questionnaires. The results are presented in this report. A wide range of questions are addressed in the body of the report. Some highlights are outlined here.

## School Autonomy

### *How Much Autonomy Do Charter Schools Have?*

1. They have a considerable amount of freedom.
2. They control key decision areas.
3. They exercise more control than comparison schools or non-charter schools.

### *Were Districts or Unions Reluctant To Relinquish Control?*

1. Few districts refused, but few fully cooperated, and some resisted.
2. Charter schools have generally cooperative relationships with their districts.
3. Most charter schools still do not have cooperative relationships with local unions.

### *What Educational and Organizational Approaches Do Charter School Administrators Say Are Most Distinctive About Their Schools?*

1. They stress the distinctiveness of their autonomy, parent involvement, cross-age teaching approaches, and alternative assessments.
2. Administrators of comparison schools stress the distinctiveness of new organizational arrangements for teaching.

### *How Do Charter School Administrators Compare Their School With Other Schools?*

1. They believe charter schools:

   - have more money and are spending it wisely;
   - have less support from the district, but are less constrained by union contracts; and
   - use more noncertified teachers, although teachers work longer hours.

2. They believe charter school teachers:

   - have more influence and authority than teachers in other schools; and
   - provide more experimental, thematic, individualized, and cooperative forms of instruction.

3. The responses of charter school administrators are, in most cases, substantially different from those provided by the administrators of comparison schools.

### *Do Schools With High Autonomy Differ From Schools With Low Autonomy?*

1. High-autonomy schools more often report:

   - greater freedom and less cooperative relationships with unions;
   - fewer purchasing restrictions, more money for instruction, spending money more wisely, and more cooperation from the district; and
   - using parent contracts, insisting on parent participation, and serving more at-risk students.

## Teacher Characteristics

### *What Kind of Preparation Do Charter School Teachers Have?*

1. Teachers with higher degrees are concentrated in schools that have converted to charter status and low-autonomy charter schools.
2. Teachers in new and secondary schools are less likely to hold "clear" credentials (credentials for life—no renewal required) than those in converted and elementary schools.
3. New schools, low-autonomy schools, and secondary schools have more teachers certified in only one subject.

### *What Teaching Experience Do They Have?*

1. By a nearly 2 to 1 ratio, new charter schools employ more beginning teachers than do converted schools.
2. Converted and low-autonomy schools have more experienced teachers.
3. Secondary-level teachers have less experience than elementary-level teachers.
4. Teachers who previously taught in private schools, or did not teach in the previous two years, are more prevalent in new and high-autonomy schools.
5. New and high-autonomy schools hire more teachers from other districts.
6. Schools with low autonomy are more likely to hire from the pool of teachers who previously taught at the school.

### *What Roles Do Charter School Teachers Perform?*

1. Teachers report more influence over curriculum and discipline policy than over grouping students and in-service instruction.
2. Compared to their counterparts in other schools, new- and high-autonomy school teachers, and elementary-school teachers, consistently report:
    - having more influence;
    - being less constrained by rules; and
    - heavier workloads.
3. High percentages of teachers in all types of schools report heavy paperwork burdens.

4. A high percentage of teachers say they experiment more in the classroom, are freer to teach as they wish, and have more influence over content and the subjects they teach.

### *Are Teachers Satisfied With Their Jobs?*

1. Teachers in new charters are the least secure about their jobs and the future, but are among the most satisfied with their jobs.
2. With few exceptions, most teachers share a common mission, maintain high standards, and consider themselves to be learners.
3. Most teachers understand the schools' goals, but goals appear to be less clear in new and secondary schools.
4. One half of the teachers feel charter status enhances overall school management.

### *What Are Teachers Doing Differently?*

1. Teachers in new schools, elementary schools, and high-autonomy schools have changed their teaching practices more than teachers in converted schools, high schools, and low-autonomy schools.
2. The most prevalent change is requiring students to build portfolios of their best work.
3. Nearly one half of the teachers more frequently:
   - employ "key instructional" practices directly related to organizing students for instruction, including cross-age tutoring, small student groups, and student projects; and
   - have reorganized the way in which they deliver instruction.
4. Less frequent changes involve outreach to the community.
5. Most teachers consider charter structure essential or valuable to changed practice.

### *How Do Teachers Group Students?*

1. Cooperative learning is the most common way students are grouped for instruction, especially in elementary schools.
2. Most teachers allow students to work at their own pace, especially in new, elementary, and high-autonomy schools.

### *How Do Teachers Perceive Their Students?*

1. Overwhelmingly, teachers perceive the academic ability of their students as comparable to students they have taught previously.

2. Most teachers do not think their students enjoy the charter school more than they enjoyed their previous school.

## Innovations

### *What Types of Innovations Are Charter Schools Implementing?*

1. The most common innovations are related to: (a) instructional strategies—use of projects or technology for learning; (b) site-based governance; and (c) parental participation.

2. Several of the most prevalent approaches seem to require fundamental structural change in the way the school functions and how it relates to the community and its client constituencies.

3. Several of the most prevalent changes require major changes in relationships between teachers and students.

4. Charter schools are implementing more innovations than comparison schools.

### *What Specific Innovations Were Identified by Respondents?*

1. Charter schools are including teachers and parents in school governance and using parents as instructors.

2. Charter schools are establishing partnerships with community agencies.

3. The roles of teachers in charter schools differ from those reported by comparison school administrators.

4. Along with changes in the structure and instructional strategies, some charter schools are targeting specific populations for learning, as was hoped for by legislators.

5. The subcategories reveal the diversity that exists across charter schools.

### *What Is the Implementation Status of the Innovations?*

1. Many of the innovations have been fully or partially implemented.

### *How Important Is Charter Status for Innovation?*

1. With a few exceptions, most respondents believe charter status is essential or valuable for the innovations they are implementing.
2. Some administrators report that charter status is not needed to implement some type of innovations.
3. Schools with high autonomy are introducing changes with respect to parent involvement, scheduling, and smaller classes more frequently than those with low autonomy.

## Parent Involvement

### *How Many Parents Participate in School Activities?*

1. Charter schools have relatively high rates of parent involvement.
2. The absolute percentage of parents involved in charter schools is relatively low (although it is possible that different parents participate in each type of activity).

### *What Do Charter Schools Do To Encourage Parent Participation?*

1. Charter school teachers provide more suggestions to parents and tend to use other selected practices for reaching parents more often than teachers in comparison schools.

### *Are Charter School Parents Active Voters in Schoolwide Ballots?*

1. Charter schools have relatively high parent-voter turnouts.
2. Still, the majority of charter school parents do not vote.

### *Are Parents in Charter Schools Assuming Leadership Positions?*

1. A substantial percentage of parents in charter schools have held leadership positions.

### *Are Parents in Charter Schools Making an Impact?*

1. In most charter schools, parents have raised controversial issues.
2. In most charter schools, parents have been responsible for changes in policies or practices.

### *Are Charter School Parents Promoting Nontraditional School Practices?*

1. Charter school parents are more likely to advocate nontraditional than traditional approaches.
2. In most schools, parents fluctuate between nontraditional and traditional approaches.

## Parent Contracts

### *What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Parent Contracts?*

1. Contracts provide guidance to parents who want to be involved but are unsure about how to go about it, or what will be helpful to the school.
2. Contracts can be used to formally or informally exclude some families.
3. The parents of students at risk could be especially vulnerable to this form of selectivity.

### *What Provisions Are Included in Parent Contracts?*

1. Contracts set forth explicit expectations parents agree to follow.
2. About one half of 23 contracts analyzed contain a "failure-to-comply" clause, which:
    - specifies parental obligations; and
    - seldom applies to schools.
3. Contracts usually do not specify the school's obligations.
4. Schools with more restrictive contracts also acknowledge their own responsibilities.
5. Schools that use contracts encourage parent involvement in other ways.

### *Is the Failure-to-Comply Clause Used With At-Risk Students?*

1. Restrictive contracts that include the failure-to-comply clause are more often used in schools with high percentage of:

    - below-average students; and

    - students classified as limited English proficient (LEP).

2. Restrictive contracts that include the failure-to-comply clause are more often used in schools with fewer students from professional families.

### *Is Parent Participation Being Used as a Criterion for Selecting Students?*

1. Parent participation frequently is used as a selection criterion.

2. Some parents who do not meet the school's participation requirements voluntarily choose not to apply, or to withdraw their child.

3. Charter schools tend to select students whose parents are more involved in the education of their children.

4. There is little difference in the student characteristics of schools that do and do not use contracts.

## Student Characteristics

### *Are Charter Schools Elitist?*

Several questions that must be answered to decide whether charter schools are elitist include:

1. Which group of students is being admitted or excluded?

2. Will an absolute or comparative standard be used to gauge elitism?

3. How many instances of skimming or creaming are needed to qualify as an elitist school?

4. How many schools are elitist?

5. How much choice do schools actually have within the available applicant pool?

### *Do Charter Schools Serve Students From a Broad Range Of Family Backgrounds?*

1. Charters resemble comparison schools in minority composition. However:
   - by a ratio of 3 to 1, converted schools more often report very high concentrations of minorities; and
   - minorities may have less access to home schools and newly created schools than to converted, classroom-based schools.
2. Charters enroll fewer low-income students than the comparison schools.
   - converted charter schools enroll higher concentrations of low-income students than new schools.
3. Students from more privileged families tend to be overrepresented in charter schools.
4. Charters are serving fewer English language learners than served by comparison schools, but the difference is small.
   - none of the five home schools enrolls as many as one in five LEP students;
   - in the vast majority of new schools, fewer than one in five students are learning the English language; and
   - nearly one half of the converted schools enroll more LEP students.

### *Are Charter Schools Serving Students Who Represent a Broad Range Of Academic Ability?*

1. Charters are not targeting above-average students:
   - home school charters are more likely than their counterparts to be made up predominantly of high academic performers; and
   - high concentrations of above-average students are only slightly more likely to be enrolled in converted schools than in new schools.

2. Charter schools serve fewer below-average students than comparisons:

   - classroom-based charters tend to have higher concentrations of below-average students than home schools; and

   - there are lower concentrations of below-average students in new schools than in converted schools.

3. Charters are serving more failing students than comparison schools:

   - home schools enroll higher percentages of failing students than classroom-based schools.

4. Charters are serving dropouts:

   - home schools also are somewhat more likely to report serving higher percentages of dropouts than are classroom-based charters; and

   - new schools enroll more dropouts than converted schools.

5. Charters are not targeting special education students:

   - new schools are slightly less likely than converted schools to serve high percentages of special education students.

### *What Conclusions Can Be Drawn About the Types of Students Served By Charter Schools?*

1. Determining whether charter schools are "elitist" cannot be glibly answered with a simple yes or no; many types of charter schools are being created to serve an extremely segmented market of students and parents.

2. The data do not substantiate the sensational charge that charter schools in California are either creaming the most able, privileged students, or as a group, skimming out those who traditionally have been underserved.

3. On the other hand, there is some evidence that, in comparison to their nearby counterparts, charter schools tend to skim students who:

   - come from low-income families;

   - have below-average test scores;

   - qualify for special education; and/or

   - are creaming students from privileged families.

4. Certain types of charter schools are less accessible than others to underserved, at-risk children.

5. With the major exceptions of reaching more dropouts and retained students than the comparison group, it appears that most charter schools are not setting path-breaking examples for serving low-income minorities who are below-average students, or who require special education. Still, the diversity of schools in the movement may ultimately provide new models and the kind of leadership that is so desperately needed.

# INTRODUCTION

California's charter schools are at the forefront of a vigorous national movement. As this is being written, nearly one half of the states in the nation have enacted some sort of charter school legislation, and federal grants are being awarded to states and independent groups to support new and existing charter schools. Currently, the 100 schools thus far authorized in California account for a substantial percentage of the nation's 250 charter schools. This report summarizes the findings from Southwest Regional Laboratory's (SWRL's) second statewide survey of many of these California schools.

A host of reforms initiated during the past decade—from waivers, to decentralization and related forms of restructuring, to charter schools, and home schooling—are premised on the gamble that deregulation will produce different, and presumably better, schools. Some critics maintain that bureaucracy has prevented public schools from reaching their full potential (Chubb & Moe, 1990). It seems to follow that freeing school administrators and teachers from most rules and regulations will produce desirable change. The theme that schools and teachers need to be freed from restrictive rules in order to do their best permeates the charter school philosophy. Therefore, this movement provides an opportunity to observe (a) whether granting schools freedom from most state regulations actually produces more freedom for school administrators and teachers, and (b) whether this autonomy produces other distinctive outcomes.

However, a recent report (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1995) casts some doubt about whether state regulations actually stifle teachers. This study, which included three states, found that some schools that obtained flexibility never used it. Most schools that created innovative programs stayed within the state's rules even though they were free to ignore them. That study, however, focused on state rules. There is a dearth of information about what happens when a school is able to operate autonomously from its district.

Charter schools in California provide a fortuitous laboratory for looking more closely at what happens when schools are released from some of the usual constraints. In California, relationships with districts take many forms because, unlike in other states, these district-level relationships are negotiated one school at a time. This study examines this variability and some of its consequences.

Several questions have guided our work, including: What are the characteristics of charter schools, and how do they differ from other schools? How much autonomy do they actually have, and does autonomy make any difference? Are charter schools introducing innovative educational programs? What kinds of teachers choose to work in charter schools, and how do they perform? Who has access to charter schools?

# CHAPTER 1: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS
## What Kinds of Schools Were Studied?

*Ronald G. Corwin and John Flaherty*

As of October 1994, 67 California schools had received approval of their petitions to establish charter schools for students in grades K-12.[1] Most were existing schools that had converted to charter status through the initiative of teachers or a collaboration of teachers, building or district administrators, and parents. Some were new schools, including a dozen home schools (authorizations for families to educate their children at home). A few of the authorized schools were devoted to special programs, such as dropout recovery for adolescents from at-risk backgrounds. Two were to be managed by existing private or nonprofit organizations. All of these schools were included in the initial phase of the survey.

## Procedures

Five different survey forms were used to collect the data described in this report. In California, charter school administrators (who received two different questionnaires) and teachers were surveyed, along with administrators from comparison schools not operating under a charter. In addition, a short survey was sent to charter school administrators in other states. The data were collected in two phases.

### *Phase 1*

The first phase commenced in November 1994, when questionnaires were mailed to 66 schools that had been authorized up to that date. Fifty-four questionnaires were returned. This represents 82% of the charter schools in existence at the time of the survey and 60% of the 90 charter schools that were authorized at the time this report was being written (see Table 1).

One purpose of this preliminary survey was to obtain information about school characteristics, administrative relationships with parent districts, the kinds of students being served, and instructional and organizational innovations they were undertaking. In addition, respondents were asked to supply three other types of information: (a) names and addresses of nearby public schools "that your students might have attended if they had not enrolled in your school"; (b) names of their teachers; and (c) copies of parent contracts, if they were being used.

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[1] Seventy charter schools had been approved at this time, but 1 had closed and 2 others decided not to open. Also, 2 schools that were part of a districtwide charter were counted as 1 for purposes of this study; the district was mailed one questionnaire.

**Table 1**
*Characteristics of the Samples*

| Survey instrument | Respondents | Date mailed | Number returned | Number mailed | Response rate (%) | Exclusions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preliminary questionnaire | California charter school administrators | 11/94 | 54 | 66 | 82 | • Three charter schools were not in operation by the time of the survey<br>• A district with two schools was sent one questionnaire |
| Comparison schools survey | California charter school administrators | 2/95 | 39 | 54 | 72 | • Eight home schools<br>• Four schools in planning stages<br>• One duplicate school (part of a two-school charter district) |
| Charter schools survey | Principals at comparison public schools | 2/95 | 46 | 83 | 55 | |
| Classroom practices survey | Charter school teachers | 2/95 | 230 | 436 | 53 | |
| National charter schools survey | National charter school administrators in seven states | 11/94-3/95 | 63 | 96 | 66 | |

### *Phase 2*

Four types of surveys were conducted during the second phase, which began in February 1995: the charter schools survey, the comparison schools survey, the classroom practices survey, and the national charter schools survey.

### *The Charter Schools Survey*

A more detailed survey booklet was sent to the charter school administrator of each of the 54 charter schools that had begun serving students by the end of 1994 and were not solely arrangements for home schooling. Four schools that had not yet begun instruction and 8 home schools were excluded. This survey was returned by 39 schools (72%) (see Table 1). It focused on school autonomy, organizational approaches, and classroom innovations being implemented.

### *The Comparison Schools Survey*

During the second phase, a similar survey was mailed to 83 principals of the nearby public schools named by charter school administrators as schools their students otherwise might have attended; 46 (55%) were returned (see Table 1). This survey collected information about school and student characteristics, teacher backgrounds, school autonomy, organizational approaches, and classroom innovations being used, as well as parent involvement.

These nearby schools will be used in this report as a basis for making inferences about differences between charter schools and the schools students would have attended if they had not enrolled in a charter school. It is important to recognize that the comparison schools do not constitute a random sample of other schools in the districts. However, they do represent a reference group for charter school administrators. Comparing them with charter schools provides a basis for gauging some of the advantages or disadvantages charter schools offer to students who elect to attend them.

### *The Classroom Practices Survey*

A special questionnaire was mailed to full-time teachers at the 54 charter schools included in this phase of the research. Using rosters provided by charter school administrators, SWRL staff randomly selected up to 10 full-time teachers at each school to receive surveys. In schools with fewer than 10 full-time teachers, surveys were mailed to all teachers. In 18 schools for which teacher rosters were not available, 10 surveys went to the administrator with instructions to randomly distribute them to up to 10 of their teachers. A selection procedures sheet was included in the mailing, which detailed this sampling process.

A total of 436 classroom practices surveys was mailed, including 180 sent to the 18 schools without teacher rosters; 230 completed teacher surveys were returned (53%). This figure probably underestimates the actual response rate because it is unlikely that 10 surveys were actually distributed to teachers at some of the schools without rosters.

The primary purpose of this survey was to assess changes teachers may have made in their teaching practices after joining the charter school. They were asked about their feelings and experiences as a charter school teacher. Also, they were asked to compare their perceptions of students and parents in the charter school with the students and parents in other schools where they had taught.

### *The National Charter Schools Survey*

To find out how charter schools in California compare with other states that have charter school legislation, SWRL also conducted a mail survey of all charter schools in the United States that had been authorized as of April 1995. Questionnaires were mailed to 96 schools in seven states outside California; 63 (66%) schools returned them (see Table 1). It is important to recognize, however, that some states had relatively few charter schools and the response rate varied across the states. Consequently a few states are represented by only one or two schools.

The purpose of this survey was to establish a comparative reference for California with respect to selected characteristics.

## ***The Elementary and Middle Grades Subsample***

Because of the diversity of charter schools in California, we have excluded some types of charters from our population for purposes of this report. Specifically, we excluded (a) four schools that had not yet begun instruction at the time of the survey, and (b) with the exception of some information about students served, eight schools that were operating solely to facilitate home-schooling arrangements for parents.

In addition, for much of the analysis, we have chosen to focus on the 45 charter schools that are serving elementary- or middle-grade students in order to eliminate some of the extreme variability. Although this winnowing process excludes some important types of schools, the strategy increases our power to generalize to one particular subsample. More than 80% of the 45 schools (37) responded to the preliminary survey, and 62% (28) returned the longer questionnaire. The 37 schools named a total of 77 nearby public schools; 40 of them (52%) responded to the longer questionnaire.

## School Parameters

California passed charter school legislation in September 1992. Approximately 40% of the schools started in 1993. The majority did not open until 1994. Of the 90 schools that had been authorized by November 1995, only 16 started during that year (18%).

### *Types of Schools*

*Converted and New Schools*

Charter schools across the nation are about equally divided between those that are new and those that have converted from an existing school. About one third of the 67 charter schools that had been authorized in California at the time of the survey were new starts; two thirds were operating before they were chartered (see Table 2). As Table 2 shows, the SWRL sample of 54 schools is very close in this regard to the population of charter schools in the state at the time of the survey. With some minor differences, other characteristics of the sample reported in the table also conform to the population.

**Table 2**
*Selected Characteristics of California Charter Schools*

| | SWRL sample (*N* = 54) | | California charter school universe at time of SWRL survey (*N* = 67) | | California charter school universe, September '95 (*N* = 90) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *N* | % | *N* | % | *N* | % |
| School type | | | | | | |
| New | 19 | 35 | 22 | 33 | 35 | 40 |
| Converted | 35 | 65 | 45 | 67 | 53 | 60 |
| Total | 54 | 100 | 67 | 100 | 88 | 100 |
| School level | | | | | | |
| Elementary | 25 | 46 | 31 | 46 | 38 | 42 |
| Elementary/middle | 11 | 20 | 15 | 22 | 22 | 24 |
| Middle/junior high | 7 | 13 | 7 | 10 | 10 | 11 |

*table continues*

|  | SWRL sample (*N* = 54) |  | California charter school universe at time of SWRL survey (*N* = 67) |  | California charter school universe, September '95 (*N* = 90) |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | *N* | % | *N* | % | *N* | % |
| Middle/high school | 3 | 6 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Senior high | 3 | 6 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Comprehensive | 5 | 9 | 6 | 9 | 8 | 9 |
| Total | 54 | 100 | 67 | 100 | 90 | 100 |
| Location |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Home-based (1) | 6 | 11 | 9 | 13 | 15 | 17 |
| Classroom-based (2) | 48 | 89 | 58 | 87 | 73 | 83 |
| Total | 54 | 100 | 67 | 100 | 88 | 100 |
| District enrollment |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 0-1,000 | 4 | 8 | 6 | 9 | 12 | 14 |
| 1,001-12,000 | 20 | 38 | 26 | 40 | 36 | 42 |
| 12,001 or more | 29 | 55 | 33 | 51 | 38 | 44 |
| Total | 53 | 101 | 65 | 100 | 86 | 100 |
| Enrollment |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Planning stages | 4 | 8 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 5 |
| 0-199 | 19 | 36 | 21 | 36 | 34 | 44 |
| 200-399 | 6 | 11 | 9 | 16 | 11 | 14 |
| 400-599 | 8 | 15 | 8 | 14 | 11 | 14 |
| 600 or more | 16 | 30 | 16 | 28 | 17 | 22 |
| Total | 53 | 100 | 58 | 101 | 77 | 99 |

California differs markedly from the other states in the ratio of new to converted schools. Only New Mexico has a smaller percentage of new charter schools. New schools make up the overwhelming majority in Colorado (93%) and in Massachusetts (92%), and they account for most charters in Minnesota and Arizona (see Table 3).

**Table 3**
*Comparisons Among States With Charters, on Selected School Parameters*

| | States with charter schools | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | CA (54) | CO (15) | MA (14) | MI (7) | MN (8) | WI (7) | NM (2) | AZ (8) | All states (115) |
| New schools (%) | 35 | 93 | 92 | 43 | 75 | 43 | 0 | 75 | 54 |
| Converted schools (%) | 65 | 7 | 8 | 57 | 25 | 57 | 100 | 25 | 45 |
| Enrollment (*N*) | 418 | 222 | 184 | 91 | 101 | 160 | 315 | 189 | 288 |
| Number of instructional staff | 44 | 15 | 20 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 12 | 18 |
| Number of full-time staff | 17 | 14 | 11 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 10 | 13 |
| Full-time staff (%) | 60 | 91 | 73 | 85 | 82 | 79 | 63 | 76 | 71 |
| Credentialed staff (%) | 60 | 78 | 66 | 83 | 72 | 75 | 38 | 62 | 67 |
| Racial/ethnic groups (%) | 43 | 22 | 37 | 41 | 38 | 20 | 70 | 50 | 38 |
| Limited English proficient (%) | 19 | 2 | 13 | 3 | 16 | 1 | 10 | 30 | 14 |
| Free/reduced-price meals (%) | 34 | 20 | 31 | 39 | 38 | 33 | 75 | 28 | 33 |
| Professional parents (%) | 29 | 51 | 36 | 24 | 39 | 26 | 30 | 40 | 33 |
| Special education placement (%) | 10 | 14 | 17 | 24 | 39 | 14 | 15 | 25 | 16 |
| Above national norm (%) | 25 | 34 | 17 | 10 | 17 | 47 | 25 | 57 | 27 |
| Below national norm (%) | 33 | 25 | 45 | 55 | 36 | 29 | 40 | 27 | 34 |
| Retained in grade (%) | 11 | 6 | 25 | 19 | 8 | 13 | 20 | 7 | 12 |
| Current/former dropouts (%) | 6 | 1 | 23 | 20 | 4 | 3 | 35 | 23 | 9 |

### *Grade Levels Served*

Forty-six percent of the 67 schools that were authorized at the time of the survey serve only the elementary grades, 22% serve elementary and middle grades, and another 10% serve only the middle grades. Only 20% of the schools include high school grades. Nine schools authorized at the time of the survey (13%) were home schools (see Table 2).

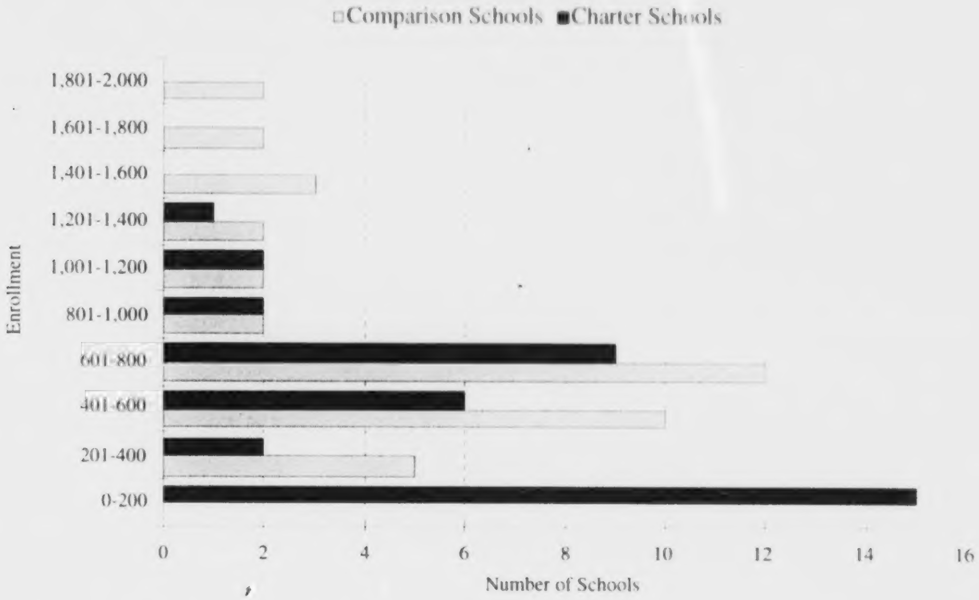
### *District Size and Enrollment*

Nearly one half of the schools in California are located in school districts with more than 12,000 students; only 14% are in districts with fewer than 1,000 students (see Table 2). Table 2 also reports school enrollments by size categories. Nearly one half of the schools enroll fewer than 200 students; at the other extreme, more than one in five enroll more than 600 students.

Results from the national survey indicate that California charter schools are larger than those in any other state for which we have data (see Table 3). The mean for the 115 schools in the national sample is 288—considerably smaller than the 418 students who attend the average California charter school. With the exception of New Mexico (mean = 315), schools in other states average one fourth to one half the size of those in California.

Figure 1 displays enrollments for the 37 elementary charter schools and 40 comparison schools in the SWRL subsamples. It demonstrates that charter schools tend to be smaller than other nearby schools. For example, no comparison school is as small as 200 students, but a substantial number of charters have only 200 students. At the other extreme, no charter enrolls more than 1,400 students, but some comparisons do. This substantial size advantage probably gives charter schools an edge over the typical public school.

**Figure 1**
*Enrollment: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



*Note.* The difference in mean enrollment is significant at the .000 level.

## *Instructional Staff*

The questionnaire elicited information about the percentage of full-time teachers, student-teacher ratios, and teacher credentials.

### *Full-Time Teachers*

The percentage of instructional staff who work full time varies from 60% to 91%, averaging 71% across the eight states (see Table 3). California is at the low end of this range (60%). As Figure 2 indicates, this percentage is a little higher in the subsample of 37 elementary school charters in SWRL's survey (66%). Even so, they employ fewer full-time teachers than do the 40 comparison schools (81%).

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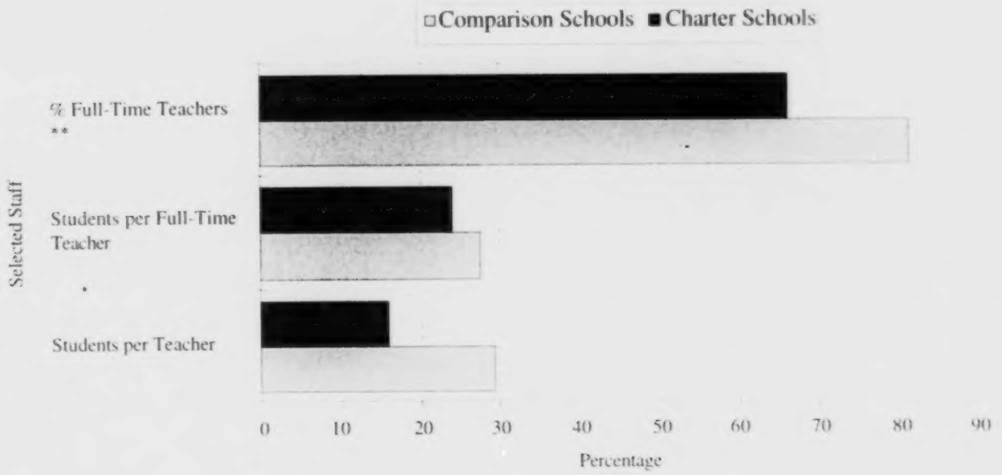
**Figure 2**
*Student-Teacher Ratios and Full-/Part-Time Teachers: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



** p < .01

*Student-Teacher Ratios*

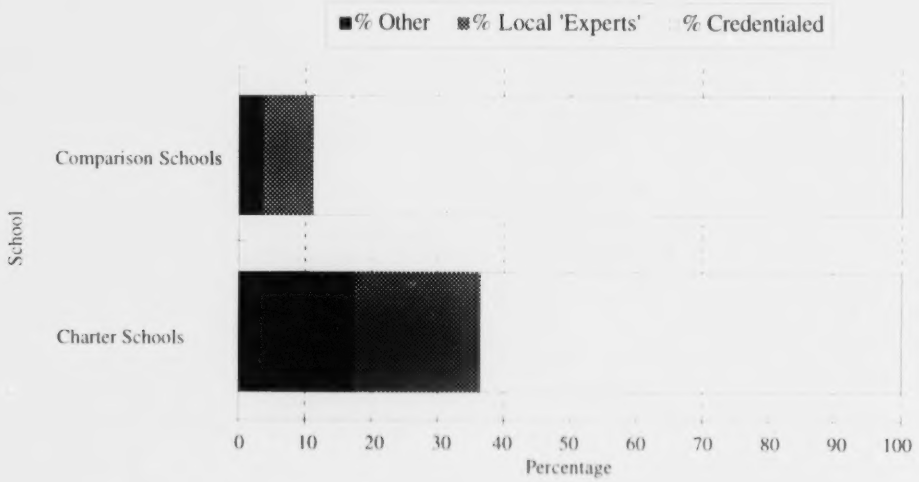
Student-teacher ratios in the subsample of 37 elementary charter schools and 40 comparison schools also are reported in Figure 2. The figure shows that by a nearly 2 to 1 margin, charter schools have more favorable student-teacher ratios: 1-16 compared to 1-29 in the comparison schools. This advantage can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that charter schools employ more part-time teachers than the comparisons; more than one in four charter school teachers work part time. The ratios for the two groups of schools are much closer when only full-time teachers are considered: 1-23 compared to 1-27.

*Credentialed Teachers*

Typically, two thirds of the charter school teachers in the nation hold a valid teaching certificate (see Table 3). However, this percentage ranges from a low of 38% in New Mexico (one school reporting) to 83% in Michigan. California, where 60% of the teachers are credentialed, is on the lower end of this range.

Figure 3 pertains to the 37 elementary charter schools and 40 comparison schools in the SWRL samples. It shows differences between charters and comparison schools in percentages of teachers who are credentialed, noncredentialed local lay "experts", and other community persons who teach in classrooms. The figure indicates that charter schools use fewer credentialed teachers than do the comparisons (64% vs. 89%), and that they use local experts and other community members about three times more often than the comparison schools.

**Figure 3**
*Credentialed Teachers and "Local Residents with Special Expertise": Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



*Note.* The difference in staff types is significant at the .05 level.

## *Student Characteristics*

The social backgrounds of charter school students vary widely from state to state.

### *Racial and Ethnic Minorities*

More than one third of students in the nation's charter schools are members of racial or ethnic minorities (38%) (see Table 3). This percentage ranges from a high of 70% in New Mexico to lows of 20% in Wisconsin and 22% in Colorado. California, where 43% of the students have minority backgrounds, is above the national mean (38%).

### *Students Classified as Limited English Proficient*

On the average, 14% of the charter school students in our national sample are classified as limited English proficient (LEP). However, in several states the percentage is negligible, while nearly one third of students in Arizona are English language learners (see Table 3). With 19%, California is second only to Arizona.

### *Students Who Qualify for Free or Reduced-Price Meals*

Using the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals as the criterion, one third of the students in the nation's charter schools have low incomes, according to our survey of other states. However, three fourths of the students in the two New Mexico schools responding to the survey are poor, while only 20% of the students in the 13 Colorado schools have low incomes. California is at the mean (34%).

### *Students Who Reside With Professional Adults*

Looking at the flip side of the students' socioeconomic scale, Table 3 shows that one in three students attending the charters in our national sample resides with one or more professional adults. One in every two students in Colorado has this family background. California is slightly below the mean on this measure (29%).

### *Students Who Qualify for Special Education*

Nationally, 16% of the students who attend charter schools qualify for special educational placement. Again, there is considerable variation across the states in the extent to which charter schools target these students—from 39% in Minnesota to a low of 10% in California.

### *Students Who Are One or More Years Above the National Norm on Standardized Tests*

One in four students in charter schools is above average academically. Twice that number (57%) attend the three Arizona schools that responded to the survey. The seven Wisconsin schools also enroll a relatively high percentage of good students (47%). In Michigan, only 1 in 10 students is above average. California is near the mean (25%).

### *Students Who Are One or More Years Below the National Norm on Standardized Tests*

One in three charter school students is below average academically, but more than one half of charter school students in Michigan are below average. California is again near the mean (33%).

*Students Retained in Grade*

Nationally, as well as in California, 12% of the students in charter schools have not been promoted to the next grade at least once. Twice that number have been retained in the six Massachusetts schools.

*Students Who Have Dropped Out of School*

Nine percent of the students in the nation's charter schools are current or former dropouts. However more than one third of the students in the two New Mexico schools are dropouts. California enrolls relatively few dropouts (6%).

## Summary and Discussion

A survey of 66 of the 67 charter schools authorized in California by November 1994 was conducted in two phases. Fifty-four schools (82%) participated in the first phase. After excluding home schools and those not yet in operation in February 1995, a second survey was mailed to administrators of 54 charter schools in California. Thirty-nine returned the survey (72%). A special survey for charter school teachers was returned by 230 (55%). Also, surveys were returned by 46 comparison schools that students would have attended had they not enrolled in charter schools. Finally, a short survey was returned by 63 charter schools in eight states with charter school legislation (66% of all schools in the nation that had been authorized by April 1995). Many of the analyses to be reported focus selectively on the 45 California charters serving elementary- or middle-school grades.

Comparisons between charter schools in California and seven other states indicate that California charter school teachers, 60% of whom have credentials, are similar to those in other states. However, within the state, our subsample of elementary and middle schools uses fewer credentialed teachers than do the comparison schools.

California differs from most other states in some respects. In particular, it has twice the percentage of converted schools (67%) as the national average, and they are typically much larger—418 students compared to the national mean of 288 students. Also, within California, the elementary-middle schools are substantially smaller than their nearby public school counterparts. In addition, California charter schools employ slightly fewer full-time teachers (60%) than charter schools in other states; and within California, our subsample of elementary and middle schools has fewer full-time teachers than the comparison schools. The subsample, by a 2 to 1 margin, also has a far more favorable student-teacher ratio than the comparisons.

Because California represents nearly half the charter schools in our national sample, it is not surprising that the state is close to average on most student background characteristics, including students from poor families (34%), percentages of students above (25%) or below (33%) national norms on standardized tests, and percentage retained in grade (11%).

Students who qualify for special education are slightly underrepresented in California, compared to the national average for charter enrollments (10% vs. 16%), as are dropouts from school (6% vs. 9%). On the other hand, California charters enroll 43% racial and ethnic minorities, and 19% of the students are classified as LEP. These figures are slightly above the national averages (38% and 14%, respectively). In addition, the state has slightly fewer students from a home where one or more parents are in a profession (29% compared to the national average of 33%).

We have computed statistical tests on most of the figures and tables. For the most part, however, we have focused on *patterns* based on magnitude of differences in response to a variety of questions. Pattern analysis can:

- demonstrate the incidence of particular facts (e.g., that a certain number of schools enroll very few minorities, or that enroll many);
- reveal trends, such as schools in which at-risk students are uniformly underrepresented on a variety of measures;
- illuminate patterns that could be valid and therefore merit closer scrutiny; and
- suggest hypotheses for further study.

Although the response rates to our surveys have been relatively robust, it is important to keep in mind that some charter schools did not return questionnaires. In addition, the number of charter schools in California increased at a steady pace during the period covered by this survey. Consequently, a substantial number of California's charter schools came into existence during or after the study, and are not included in it. Nevertheless, our analysis of selected school characteristics suggests that our sample closely resembles the charter schools in existence at the time of the survey, and that, in most respects, it also accurately reflects the bulk of schools that formed after the survey. However, this does not rule out some sample bias. Therefore, we cannot be certain that our conclusions apply uniformly to the current population of charter schools in California. We offer them for what they are—conjectures closely grounded in the available information. We have tried to present the data fully and in a meaningful way so that readers can arrive at independent interpretations.

# CHAPTER 2: SCHOOL AUTONOMY
## How Much Freedom Do Charter Schools Have?

*Ronald G. Corwin*

Several schools in SWRL's previous survey of California charters proved to be independent in name only (Dianda & Corwin, 1994, p. 29). Therefore, it will be instructive to treat school autonomy as a variable in order to determine the amount of control charter schools have over various functions, and what they do with it.

The degree of autonomy enjoyed by a school is a product of both its legal status, as defined by state legislation, and its operational discretion, as determined by formal and informal arrangements among schools within a given state.

Charter schools are legally independent in several states, including Arizona, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Minnesota. They are legally part of the traditional district structure in most other states, including Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, New Mexico, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. California is the only state that requires schools to negotiate their autonomy with the district, and hence charter schools in California run the gamut—from being almost totally independent to being fully incorporated within the district structure.

## The Balance of Control Within Districts

Because every charter school in California negotiates its relationship with the district, we wondered whether charter school administrators think they have achieved more autonomy as a result of these negotiations.

### *How Much Autonomy Do Charter Schools Have?*

Charter school administrators were asked to indicate how much freedom their school has compared to other schools in the district. Table 4 displays the results.

**Table 4**
*How Much Freedom Does Your Charter School Now Have, Compared to Other Schools In Your District?*

| | Freedom (%) |
|---|---|
| No more ($N = 2$) | 5 |
| A little more ($N = 11$) | 28 |
| Considerably more ($N = 26$) | 67 |

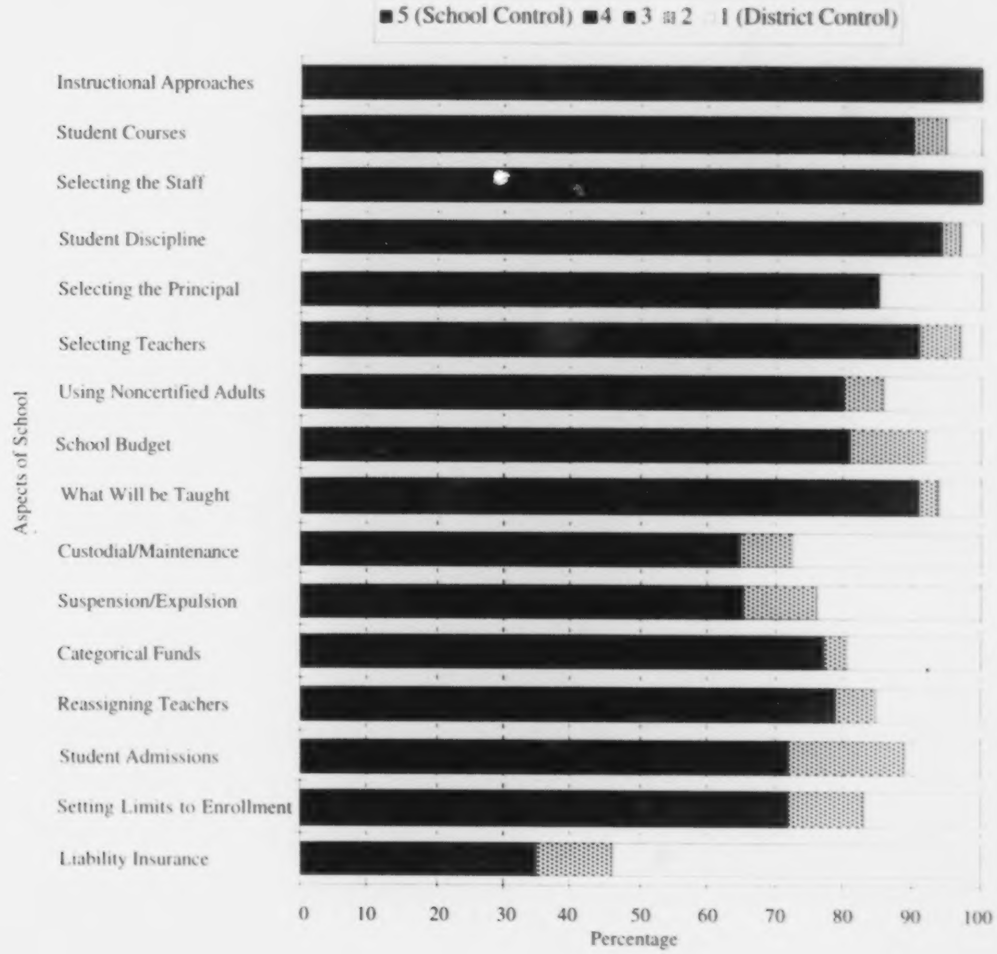
### *Charters Have Freedom*

As Table 4 indicates, nearly all of the respondents believe that their schools have more freedom under the charter; and most (67%, $N = 26$) say they have *considerably* more. Only two (5%) say they have no more freedom. However, more than 1 in 4 (28%) estimate they have only a little more freedom. We suspect that this break between "a little more" and "considerably more" signals an important difference that is worth following up. In an analysis reported later in this chapter, we attempt to quantify this distinction in order to learn more about what difference the level of autonomy makes.

### *Charters Control Key Decision Areas*

To gain more understanding about the decisions schools do and do not control, administrators of charter schools and the comparison schools (as described in Chapter 1) were presented with a list of decisions and asked to estimate, on a scale from 1 to 5, the relative balance of control between the district and the school. Figure 4 portrays the percentages of (a) districts, as well as (b) charter schools that totally control each type of decision listed.

**Figure 4**
*Level of Control Exercised by Schools and Districts*



The left side of Figure 4 shows that:

1. Most charter schools fully control (i.e., 5 on the scale):
    - instructional approaches;
    - course offerings;
    - selecting staff, teachers, and the principal;

- student discipline; and
- use of noncertified adults.

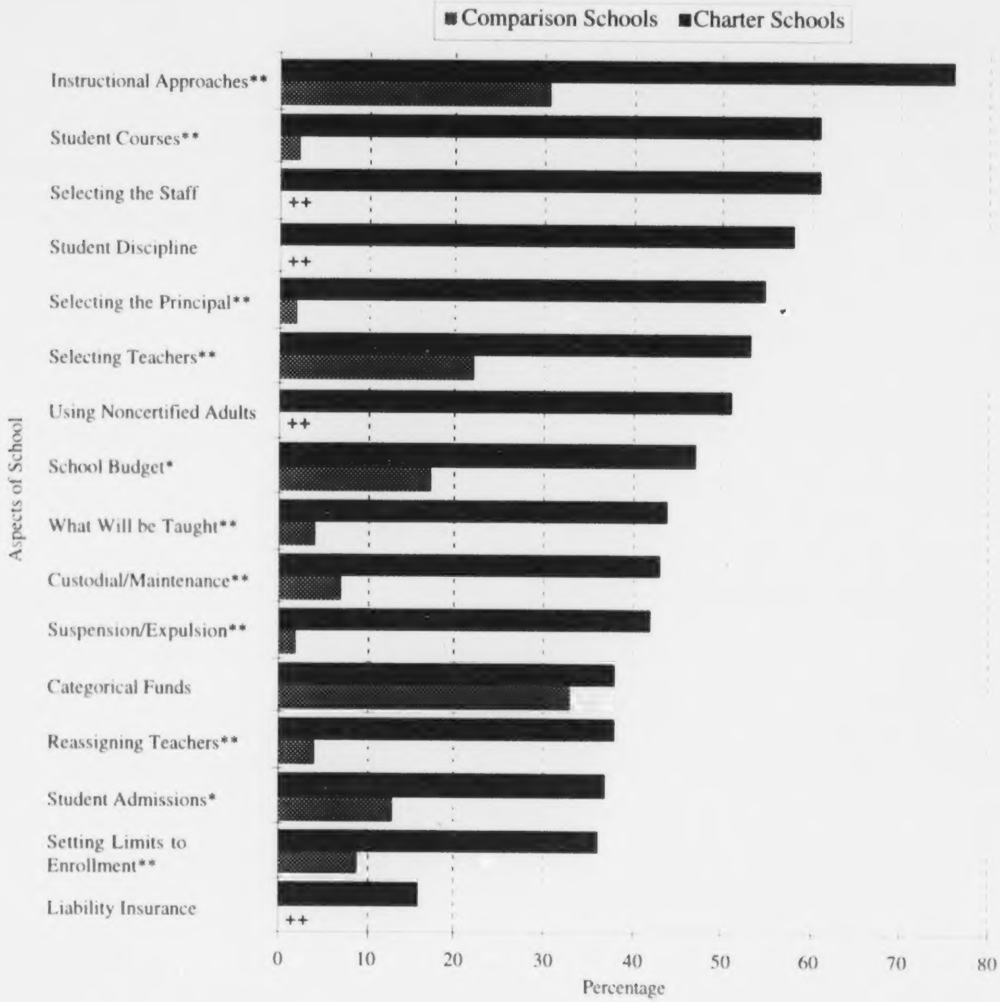
2. Charter schools have a high degree of control over (i.e., 5 or 4 on the scale):

   - the budget;
   - course content;
   - student admissions;
   - rules governing suspending and expelling students;
   - setting enrollment caps;
   - reassigning and transferring teachers;
   - expenditure of categorical funds; and
   - custodial/maintenance services.

### *Charter Schools Exercise More Control Than Comparison Schools*

Figure 5 depicts the percentages of *schools* that fully control each decision area listed (i.e., response 5). Figure 6 reports the percentages of *districts* that fully control the same decisions (i.e., response 1). The figures also include responses of the administrators of comparison schools. The figures reveal that, generally, charter schools are far more likely than the comparison schools to control each decision area listed. For most of the decisions, few comparison schools are in full control (see Figure 5). Even for the decisions the comparisons more fully control, charter schools retain a high ratio of relative advantage. For example, 30% of the comparison schools fully control instructional approaches, but the percentage is 2.5 times higher for charters. Control over categorical funds is the only exception; about one third of both the charters and the comparison group fully control this type of decision.

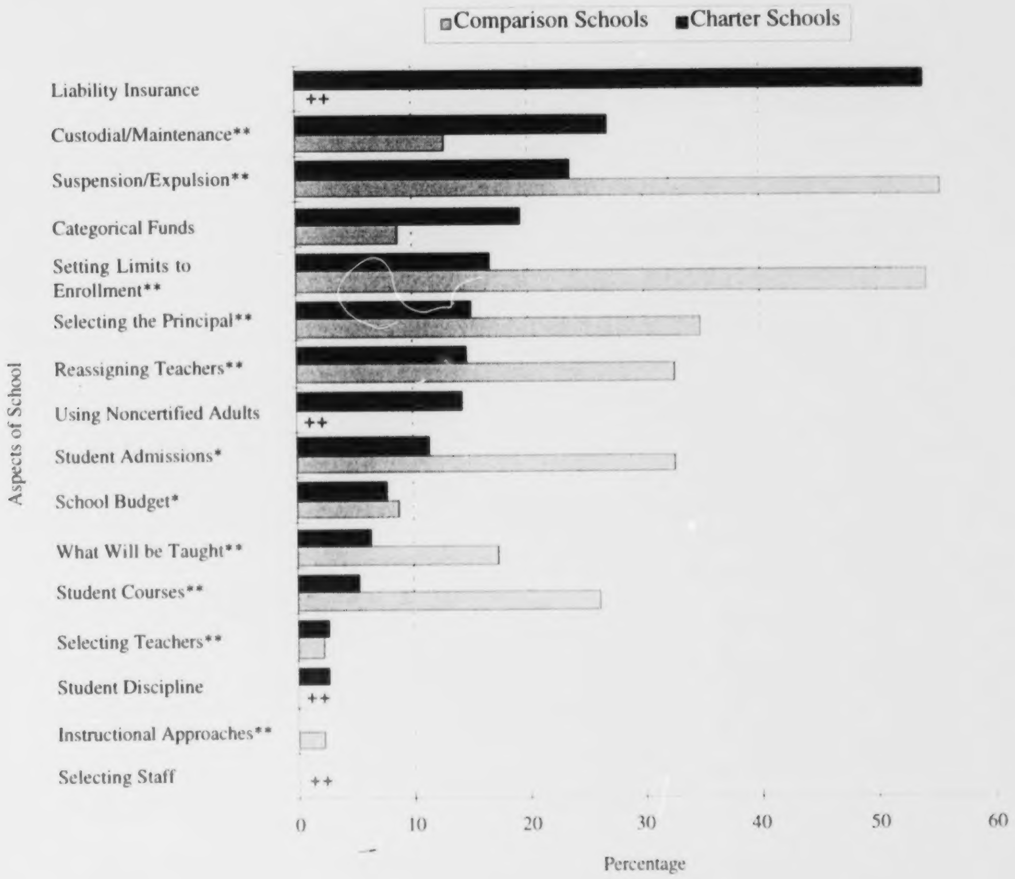
**Figure 5**
*Percentage of Schools That Fully Control Program Areas*



* p < .05 ** p < .01

++ Questions not asked of comparison schools.

**Figure 6**
*Percentage of Districts That Fully Control Program Areas*



* p<.05 ** p<.01

++ Questions not asked of comparison schools.

The picture changes only slightly if one considers the percentages of comparison schools that responded in either of the two extreme categories of the control scale (1 or 2). The ratio of differences still favors charter schools in all but one instance—comparison schools have more control over categorical funds (not shown). However, it should be noted that charter schools' advantage is relatively narrow in a few areas (i.e., a ratio difference under 2). The areas are instructional approaches, student selection, and school budget.

Charter schools do control many of the key decisions, and they control them more frequently than do comparison schools. However, it is important to recognize that wide variation exists throughout the state in the balance of control between charter schools and their districts. For example, at least one fourth of the districts maintain a high degree of control over student admissions, rules governing student suspension/expulsion, enrollment caps, categorical funds, and custodial/maintenance services. Also, several districts exercise a high degree of control over the budget, and a few continue to control course content, subjects taught, selection of the principal and teachers, and teacher transfers.

### ***Were Districts Reluctant To Relinquish Control?***

The presence of a charter school can place a district in the difficult position of being ultimately responsible for the school's actions without necessarily being able to closely monitor or control the school. Therefore, we wondered whether districts resisted when a school requested more control over important decisions.

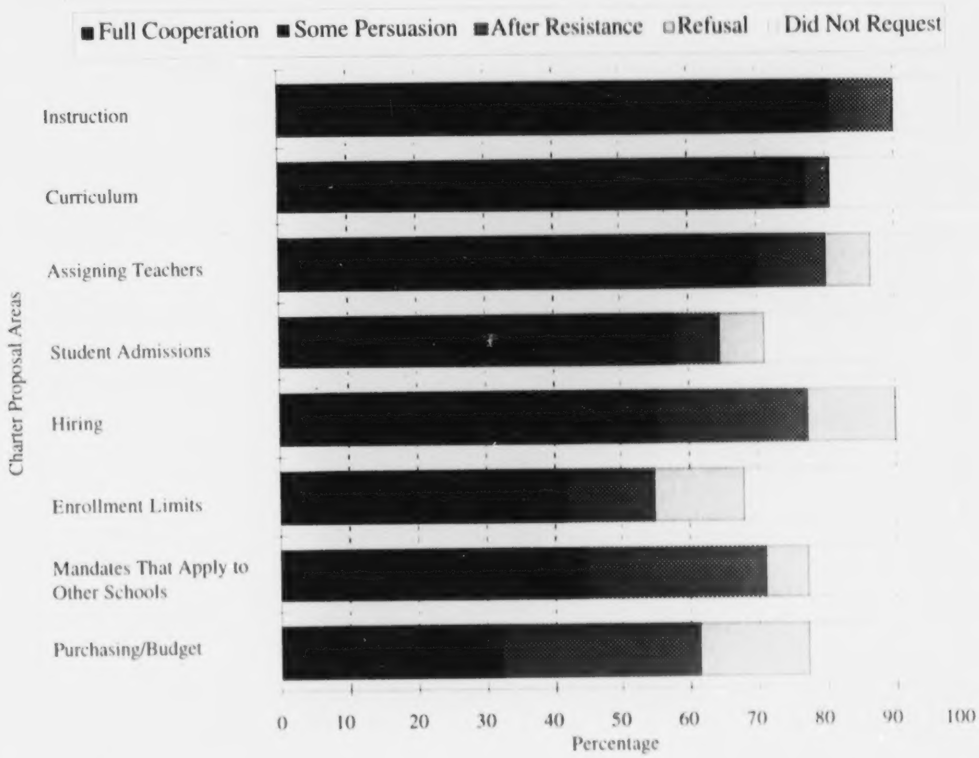
#### *Few Districts Refused, But Also Few Fully Cooperated, and Some Resisted*

Figure 7 indicates that all but a handful of schools *requested* more authority over the types of decisions listed. Figure 7 also indicates that only a handful of districts *refused* to relinquish control. However, many other districts resisted, had to be persuaded, or both, to give up some authority. The greatest resistance occurred in spheres districts traditionally have controlled, especially:

- purchasing/budgeting;
- hiring;
- setting enrollment caps; and
- districtwide mandates.

In addition, Figure 7 suggests that while only a few districts fully cooperated with schools wanting to control these spheres, the schools often have successfully overcome this reluctance, through persuasion or other means.

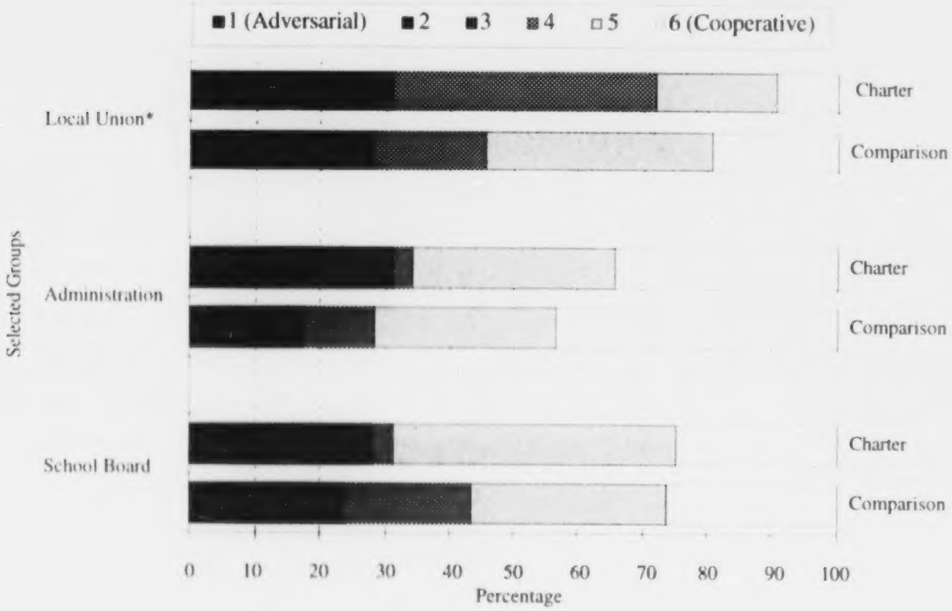
**Figure 7**
*Level of School District Cooperation With Requests From Schools for More Control*



*Schools Have Cooperative Relationships With the District*

Notwithstanding some resistance from the districts, Figure 8 demonstrates that most schools have relatively cooperative relationships with school district administrators and local boards. Only a few charter schools are at the adversarial end of the continuum portrayed in Figure 8, and their patterns do not differ substantially from the comparison schools.

**Figure 8**
*Current Relationships With Local Teachers' Unions, District Administration, and School Boards: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



* p < .05

*Most Schools Still Do Not Have Cooperative Relationships With Local Unions*

Figure 8 also indicates that there is some tension with local teachers' unions. While most schools are not in adversarial relationships with them, only one in four has a highly cooperative relationship (i.e., 5 or 6 on the scale). This relatively low level of cooperation seems to be associated with the activities of charter schools because more of the comparison schools (more than half) report cooperative relationships.

## Distinctive Features of Charter Schools

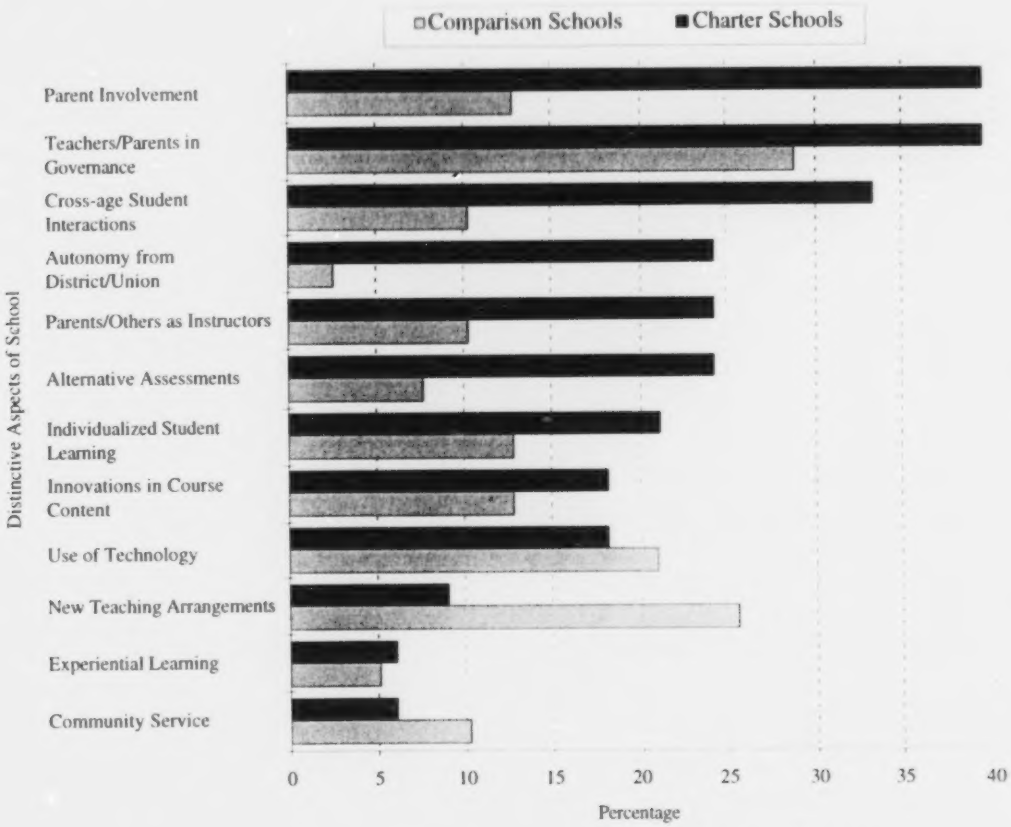
We wanted to know what difference autonomy makes for a school and teachers, and whether it affects what happens in classrooms. Two approaches were taken. First, principals of charter schools and comparison schools were asked to select from a list of educational and organizational approaches the ones that most distinguish their schools from other public schools in the area.

Second, charter school administrators were asked to compare their school with most other schools in the district on specified criteria[2].

### *Which Educational and Organizational Approaches Are Most Distinctive?*

From the perspective of their administrators, charter schools have several distinctive features. Moreover, the principals of charter schools and the principals of the other schools identify different distinctive features. These differences can be seen in Figure 9.

**Figure 9**
*The Most Distinctive Features Identified by the Administrators of Charter Schools and of Comparison Schools*



*Note*. Questions differed slightly for charter schools and comparison schools, and therefore no tests of significance were performed.

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[2] This analysis is based on the observations of charter school administrators. Teachers' reports of their classroom practices are discussed in Chapter 3: Teacher Characteristics.

### *Charter Schools Stress Their Autonomy, Parent Involvement, Cross-Age Teaching Approaches, And Alternative Assessments*

One difference is that autonomy from the district, union, or both, are mentioned far more often by charter school administrators than by comparison school administrators. Charter school administrators mention autonomy six times more frequently than administrators of comparison schools (24% vs. 3%). The other major contrasts between the two types of schools can be summarized as follows. In charter schools:

1. Parents are more frequently involved in the daily life of the school.
2. Cross-age teaching approaches are used more often.
3. Alternative assessments are more prevalent.
4. Parents and others are more frequently used as instructors.

Charter school administrators singled out parent involvement, cross-age teaching, autonomy, and use of alternative assessments at least three times more often than did the administrators of comparison schools. They identified parents as instructors twice as frequently. For example, nearly 40% of charter school principals, but only 13% of the comparison school principals, stress involving parents in the school; and one third of the former, compared to 11% of the latter, use mixed age groupings. Nearly one fourth of the charter schools use alternative forms of assessment, compared to 8% of the comparison schools. Nearly one fourth of the charters (24%) use parents and others as instructors or aides, but only 11% of the comparison schools use parents in this capacity.

### *Comparison Schools Stress New Organizational Arrangements for Teaching*

By a 3 to 1 margin, the administrators of comparison schools more often identified new organizational arrangements for teaching as their most distinctive quality.

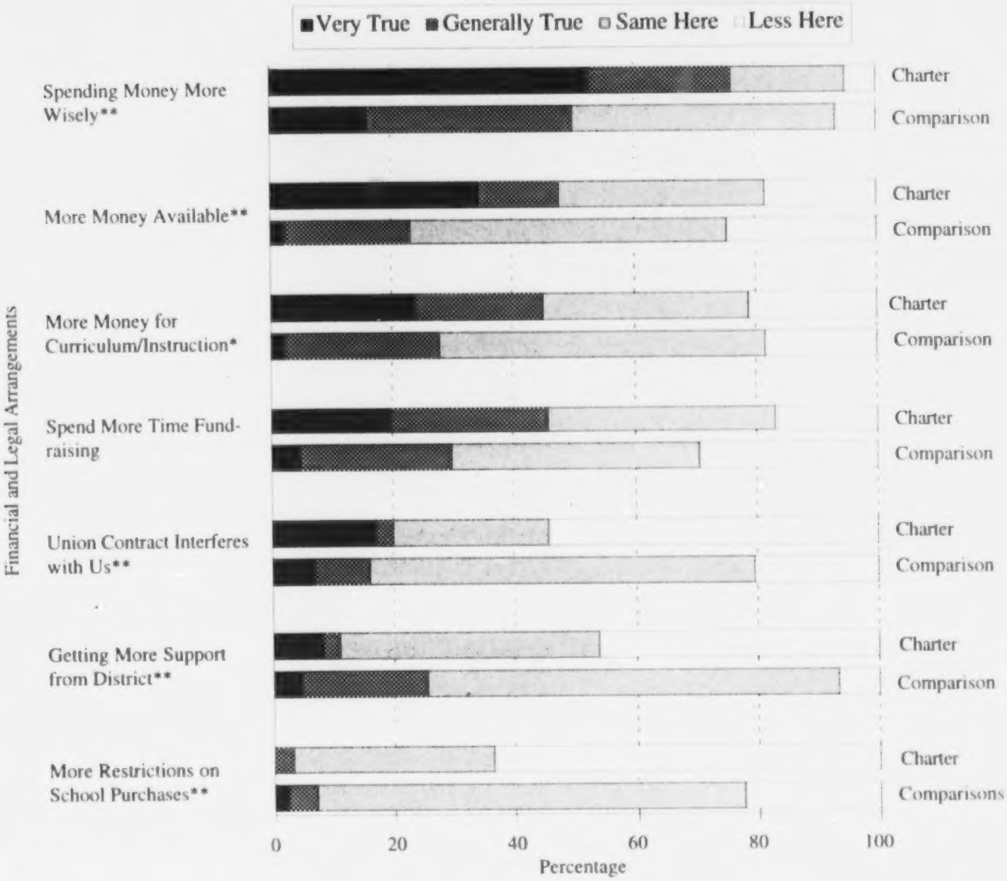
## ***How Do Charter School Administrators Compare Their School With Others?***

Charter school administrators also were asked to compare their school with most other schools in the district on specified criteria. The results are shown in Figures 10, 11, and 12.

*Financial Situation and Administrative Support*

The way charter school administrators compare their financial situation and sources of interference or support is depicted in Figure 10.

**Figure 10**
*Financial and Legal Characteristics: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



* p<.05 ** p<.01

*Charter Schools Have More Money and Are Spending It Wisely*

The majority of charter school principals (64%) say that their school has fewer purchasing restrictions than most other schools. In response to whether they have more money for their objectives, nearly half (47%) of the charter school administrators agree they do (i.e., the statement is *very true* or *generally true*). Nearly as many say there is more money for curriculum and instruction (45%). More than 50% of them agree that the statement, *they are spending the money more wisely*, is *very true*; an additional one fourth say it is *generally true* (see Figure 10).

### *Charter Schools Have Less Support From the District, But Are Less Constrained By Union Contracts*

Nearly one half of the charter school administrators (46%) believe they have less support from the district than other schools enjoy, but at the same time, more than one half (54%) report they are less encumbered by union contracts. Also, many charter schools are devoting more time raising funds than is true of most other schools in the district. Nearly one fourth of the respondents answered *very true* in response to that statement, and slightly more said it is *generally true* in their case (see Figure 10).

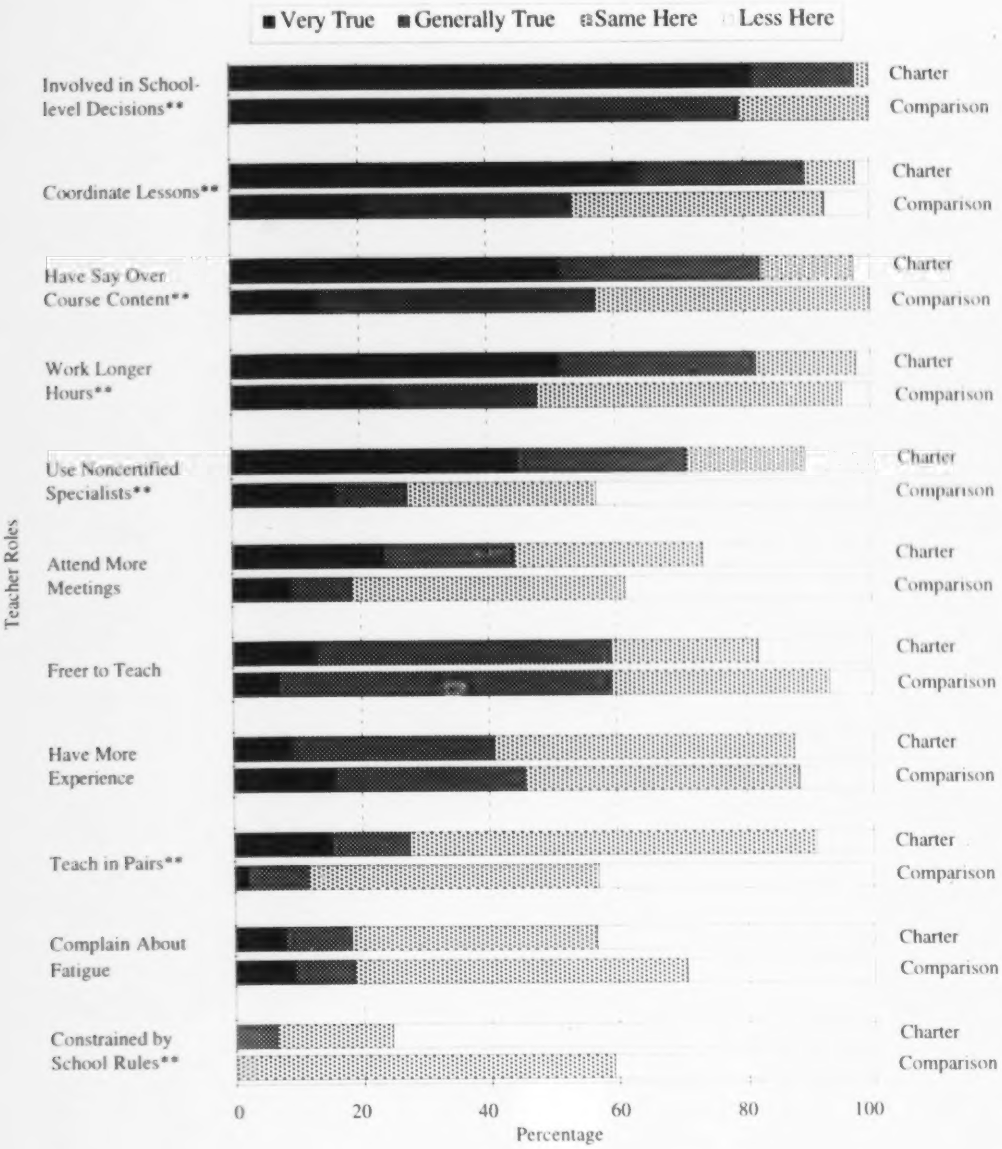
### *Charter Schools Are Substantially Different From Comparison Schools in Several Other Respects*

By wide margins, comparison schools have more purchasing restrictions, and are less likely to say they have more money or to believe they are spending it more wisely. Similarly, administrators of comparison schools are less likely to report either less support from the district or less interference from union contracts. They also report less time spent on fund-raising. For example, twice as many charter school administrators report fewer purchasing restrictions, and they report *very true* in response to whether there is more money for instruction by a margin of 1:10. They say it is *very true* that they are spending money more wisely nearly three times more often. The difference in the percentage saying that union contracts interfere is smaller, but charter schools still concur that the statement is *very true* by a 2 to 1 margin (see Figure 10).

### *Teachers' Roles*

Figure 11 reports how charter school administrators compare what their teachers are doing with the roles of teachers in most other schools.

**Figure 11**
*Teacher Roles: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



** p < .01

### *Charter School Teachers Have More Influence and Authority Than Teachers In Other Schools*

Overwhelmingly, charter school administrators say it is *very true* that their teachers are more involved in school-level decisions (see Figure 11). The majority also chose *very true* in response to the statement, *teachers have more say over course content.* In addition, most feel that their teachers are less constrained by school rules and that their teachers coordinate lessons. Slightly more than 1 in 10 responded *very true* to the statement that *teachers are freer to teach*, but when the *generally true* response is included, the majority also agree with that statement.

### *Charter Schools Use More Noncertified Teachers, But Even So, Teachers Work Longer Hours*

Figure 11 also suggests that, even though charter schools frequently use noncertified specialists, the teachers work longer hours. Considering only the percentage of respondents who chose *very true*, 45% say their schools use noncertified specialists, and more than one half estimate that their teachers work longer hours. Despite this workload, however, according to many of the administrators (42%), they complain less or are less stressed than most other teachers.

Half the respondents see no difference between their school and most other schools in the experience of their teachers and the percentage of teachers who teach in pairs.

### *Charter Schools Are Substantially Different From Comparison Schools in Teachers' Roles*

Introducing the comparison schools into the analysis confirms that, from the administrators' point of view, there is no difference in the teaching experience of teachers employed in the two types of schools. Also, there is only a small ratio difference between the two samples with respect to whether teachers are freer to teach and whether they complain about stress.

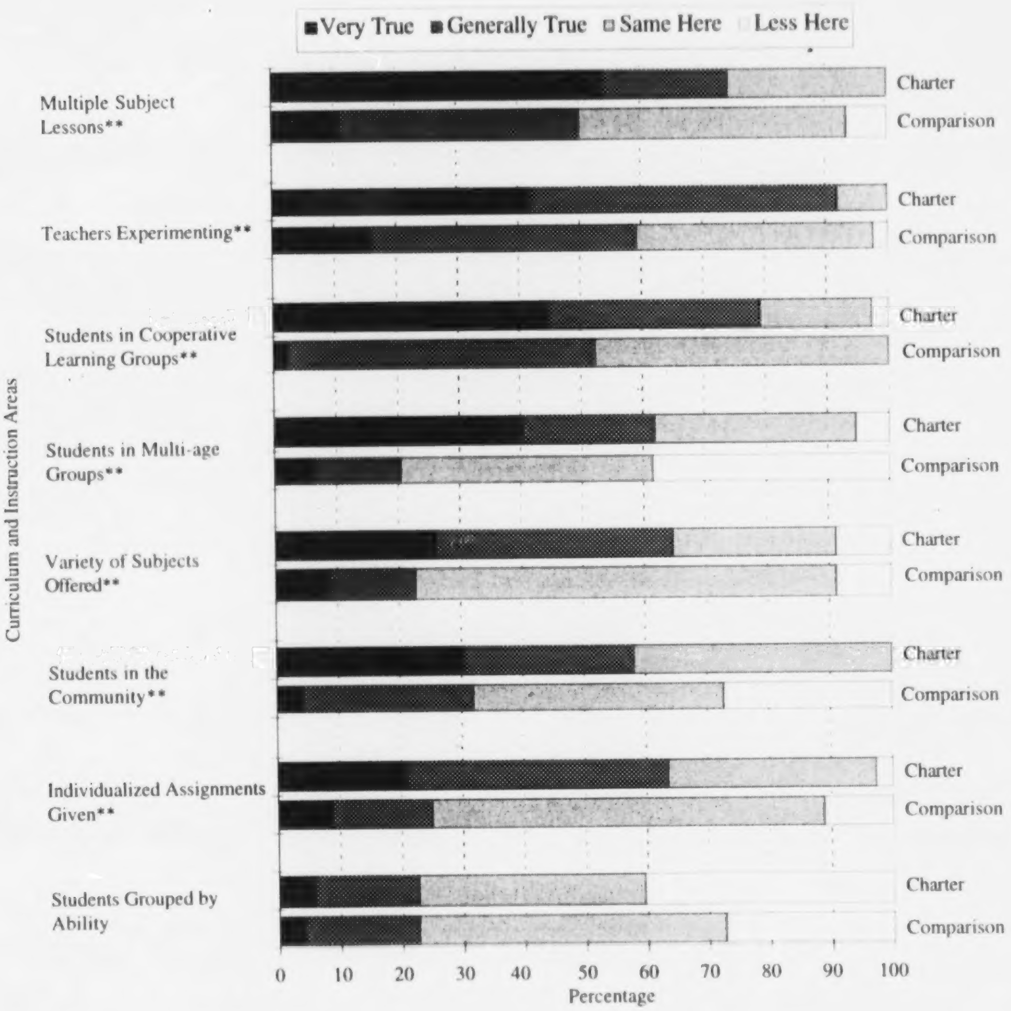
However, with difference ratios ranging between 2 to 1 and 3 to 1, the administrators attribute teachers in charter schools with more authority than teachers in comparison schools. For example, whereas more than one half of the administrators of charter schools say it is *very true* that teachers as a group have more say, only 14% of the comparison school administrators agree with that comment. The respective percentages who attribute more involvement of teachers in school-level decisions are 82% versus 41%. Moreover, by a ratio of nearly 2 to 1, fewer administrators in comparison schools believe their teachers are less constrained by rules.

About two thirds of the charter school administrators, but only one fifth of the others, think it is *very true* that teachers more often coordinate lessons. Double the number of charter school administrators report that their teachers work longer hours, and that their schools use noncertified specialists.

### *Curriculum and Instruction*

Each principal also was asked to consider how curriculum and instruction practices used in the charter school compare with other schools in the district (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12**
*Curriculum and Instruction: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



** $p < .01$

### *Charter School Teachers Provide More Experimental, Thematic, Individualized, and Cooperative Forms of Instruction*

Nearly one half of the charter school administrators believe it is *very true* that their teachers experiment more than other teachers in the district, and overwhelmingly they agree that is *generally true*. Also, more than one half say it is *very true* that teachers use lessons that incorporate multiple subjects. In addition, most say it is *generally true* that their teachers are more likely to:

- give individualized assignments;
- offer a wider variety of subjects;
- group students in cooperative learning groups and multi-age groups; and
- involve students in community service.

### *Charter Schools Are Substantially Different From Comparison Schools in the Way Teachers Teach*

There is no difference in the use of ability grouping between charters and comparisons, but the ratio differences are substantial with respect to the other curriculum and instruction characteristics (see Figure 12). For example, by nearly a 3 to 1 margin, charter school principals more often say it is *very true* that teachers experiment more frequently (42% vs. 16%). Charter school administrators stress the use of multiple subject lessons five times more frequently, and they stress variety of subjects and individual assignments twice as often.

Only a negligible percentage of comparison schools group students in unconventional ways or involve them in community service. Indeed, one fourth of the comparison school administrators say that their students are less likely to be involved in community service, whereas no charter school administrator makes that statement, and nearly one third of the latter stress its importance at their school.

## Comparisons Between High-Autonomy and Low-Autonomy Charter Schools

In California, each school negotiates with its district the right to control specific functions, including the right to: purchase or lease property, contract for services, determine its own budget, receive funds directly, control the educational program, select student assessment procedures, hire and fire personnel, be exempt from collective bargaining, employ noncertified instructors, and be exempt from districtwide mandates. Charter schools that have won the right to control such decisions have more autonomy than other charters. We wondered what difference this autonomy makes. To answer the question, we first constructed a scale to measure school autonomy, and then divided the charter schools in the sample into two groups based on that scale, namely those with high autonomy and those with low autonomy.

## ***Methods***

We proceeded by developing a measure of autonomy and dividing the sample at the midpoint on this measure. The analysis focuses on patterns among clusters of variables.

### *Measuring School Autonomy*

To construct the school autonomy scale, first, the decision areas listed below were identified from the questionnaire:

- instructional approaches/strategies;
- courses students take;
- rules regulating suspension and expulsion;
- student discipline/behavior code;
- selecting the staff;
- selecting the principal;
- reassigning or transferring teachers;
- school budget;
- expenditure of categorical funds;
- custodial/maintenance;
- liability insurance;
- deciding what will be taught;
- deciding which students will be admitted;
- setting limits to enrollment;
- selecting classroom teachers; and
- using noncertified adults as classroom teachers.

Then, for each school, the responses to the items in the pool were added to form a total score for the school. Next, the distribution of these total scores was divided at the midpoint. Schools with total scores above the median are called *high-autonomy schools.* Schools whose total scores fall below the median are called *low-autonomy schools.* The following analysis compares these two sets of schools on selected questionnaire items.

### *Approach to the Analysis*

All of the variables from the two school questionnaires—most of which have been discussed to this point—were subjected to this analysis. It is important to recognize that, because of the small sample size, the cell sizes are quite small. Because the data do not permit conclusive generalizations, we have chosen to shift the focus from particular findings to the *patterns* among batteries of items and to focus on tables that have at least a 2 to 1 ratio difference in one or more cells.

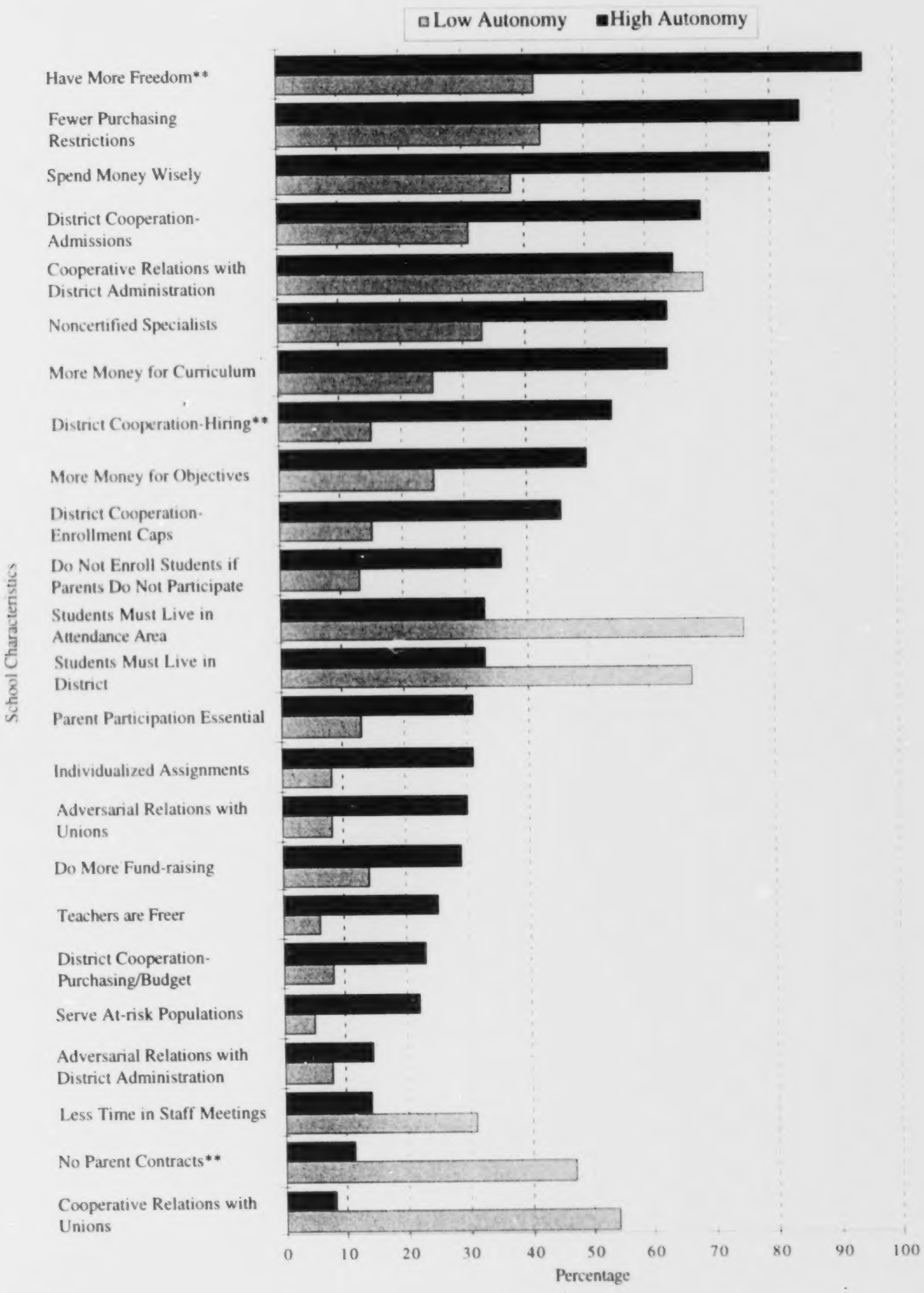
## ***Do Schools With High Autonomy Differ From Schools With Low Autonomy?***

The patterns suggest that autonomy does make a difference. Charter schools with high levels of autonomy differ in some important respects from other charters. Figure 13 compares the responses of schools with low autonomy with the schools that measure high on our autonomy scale. Figure 14 displays only the magnitude of the *differences*, arranged in rank order. Items in which high-autonomy schools exceed low-autonomy schools are shown by the bars on the right side of the table. Differences graphed on the left side, at the bottom of the figure, pertain to items on which low-autonomy schools exceed high-autonomy schools.

### *Schools With High Autonomy Have More Freedom, and Their Teachers Are Freer To Teach As They Wish*

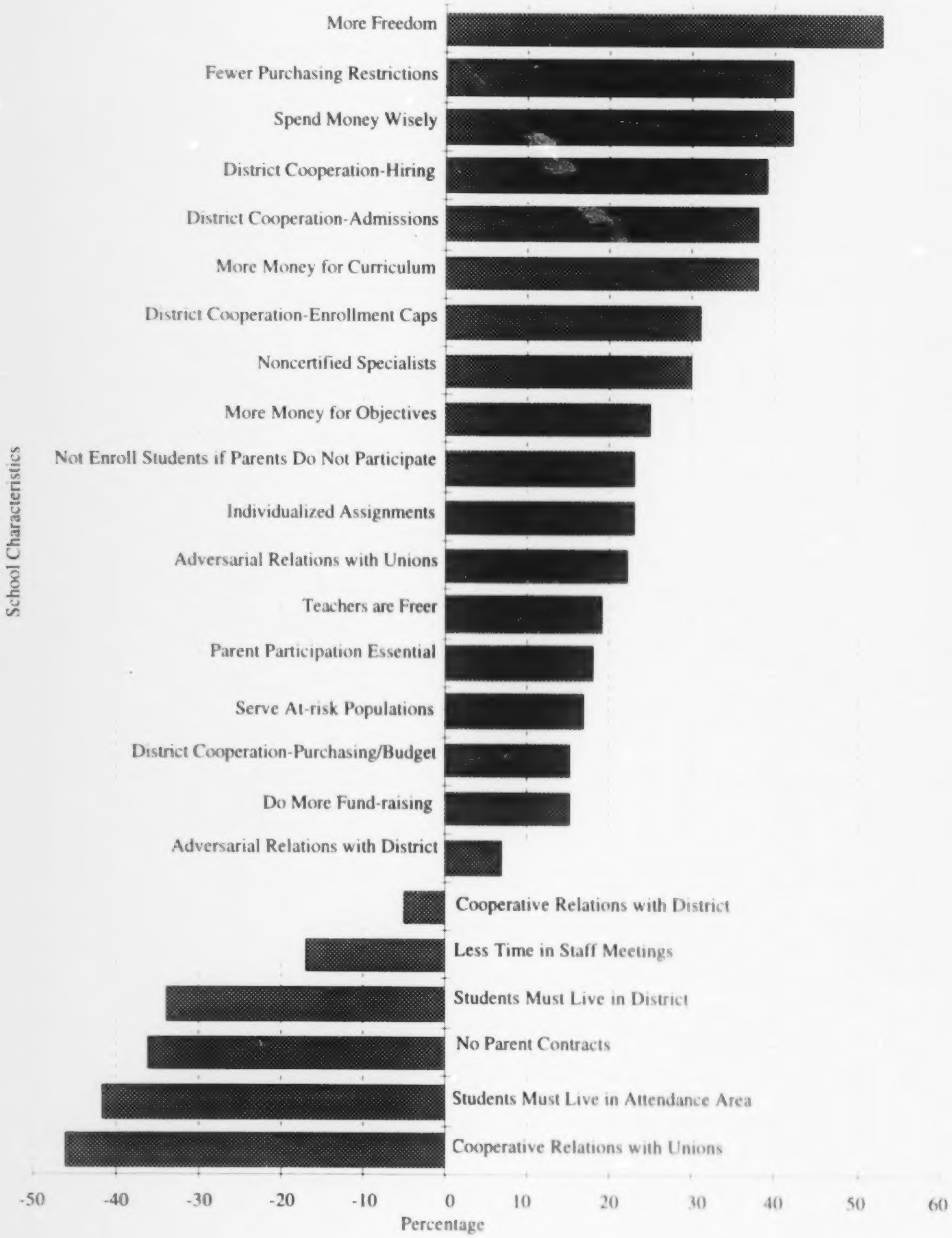
Figure 13 indicates a 2 to 1 difference in teachers' freedom. Figure 14 indicates that there are approximately 50% differences in the amount of freedom for the school.

**Figure 13**
*Characteristics of Charter Schools With High and Low Levels of Autonomy*



** p < .01

**Figure 14**
*Differences in Percentage of Charter Schools With High and Low Levels of Autonomy*



### *High-Autonomy Schools Have Less Cooperative (and More Adversarial) Relationships With Unions, and Slightly More Adversarial Relations With the Administration*

By a 6 to 1 margin, high-autonomy schools have less cooperation with unions. They also report having more adversarial relations with unions, by a margin of more than 3 to 1. The overall amount of cooperation with the district administration is comparable for both types of schools, but high-autonomy schools somewhat more often (a nearly two to one ratio) report having adversarial relations with district administration (see Figure 13).

### *High-Autonomy Schools Have Fewer Purchasing Restrictions, More Money for Instruction and Spend It More Wisely, and Get More Cooperation From the District When Requesting Control Over Hiring, Admissions, and Enrollment Caps*

Other large differences in Figures 13 and 14 are summarized as follows: The *high*-autonomy schools *more* often report:

- fewer purchasing restrictions;
- spending money more wisely;
- more money for instruction;
- full cooperation from the district when requesting control over hiring, admissions, and enrollment caps; and
- using noncertified specialists.

The *high*-autonomy schools *less* often report:

- requiring students to live in a specific attendance area or in the district.

### *High-Autonomy Schools Use Parent Contracts More Frequently, and More Often Insist on Parent Participation; They Also Serve More At-Risk Students*

By a nearly 5 to 1 ratio, high-autonomy schools more often use parent contracts. Other differences reflect a percentage spread under 30%, but the patterns are nonetheless worth reviewing. In particular, high-autonomy schools more often refuse to enroll students if parents do not participate (36% vs. 13%), and consider parent participation essential for admitting a student (31% vs. 13%). These patterns suggest that schools with high and low levels of autonomy may tend to select students on different criteria. At the same time, high-autonomy schools tend to enroll more students with backgrounds that put them at high educational risk (22% vs. 5%) (see Figure 13).

Also, high-autonomy schools tend to stress individualized assignments (31% vs. 8%), spend more time raising funds (29% vs. 14%), and require less time in staff meetings (31% vs. 14%).

*High- and Low-Autonomy Schools Do Not Differ in Many Other Important Respects*

However, it also is important to recognize that in an analysis not presented in the figures, no distinguishable differences were found between high- and low-autonomy schools in many other respects, including:

- having obtained full cooperation from the districts for waivers on districtwide mandates;
- the involvement of teachers in school-level decisions and in joint planning;
- teachers' work hours;
- teachers' complaints;
- the amount of teacher experimentation;
- the variety of subjects offered; and
- general support from the district.

## Summary and Discussion

Because charter schools in California negotiate their relationships with their districts, we tried to discern whether charter school administrators think they have achieved more autonomy as a result of these negotiations. We found that nearly all of them believe their school has more freedom under the charter, and most believe it has *considerably* more freedom. Most charter schools *fully control* instructional approaches and course offerings. They can select their staff, teachers, and principal. And, they control policies and practices governing student discipline. In addition, they have *a high degree of control* over their budgets, the content of courses, student admission practices, rules governing suspending and expelling students, setting enrollment caps, reassigning and transferring teachers, and even expenditures of categorical funds and custodial/maintenance services. Moreover, charter schools exercise more control over more key decisions than do the nearby schools that students would have attended had they not enrolled in a charter school.

However, it also is important to recognize that the balance of control between charter schools and their districts varies widely throughout the state. For example, at least one fourth of the districts maintain a high degree of control over student admissions, rules governing student suspension/expulsion, enrollment caps, categorical funds, and custodial/maintenance services. Also, several districts exercise a high degree of control over the budget and a few continue to control course content, subjects taught, selection of the principal and teachers, and teacher transfer.

Because charter schools create unprecedented issues for most school districts, we asked charter school administrators whether districts were reluctant to relinquish control. Although few districts explicitly refused to turn over control to the charter, the respondents said that only a few districts fully cooperated; some resisted. The greatest resistance occurred in the spheres districts have traditionally controlled, especially regarding purchasing and budgeting, hiring, setting enrollment caps, and districtwide mandates. However, it appears that the schools often have successfully overcome this resistance through persuasion as well as other means.

Notwithstanding some resistance in the past, most schools currently characterize their relationships with the district as cooperative. Only a few charter schools—no more than the comparisons—report adversarial relationships. However, in contrast to comparison schools, most charter schools still do not enjoy cooperative relationships with local teachers' unions.

We wanted to know what difference this high degree of autonomy and control makes for a school and for its teachers, and whether it affects what happens in classrooms. Two approaches were taken. First, principals of charters and comparison schools were asked to select from a list of educational and organizational approaches the ones that most distinguish their schools from other public schools in the area. Second, charter school administrators were asked to compare their school with most other schools in the district on specified criteria.

From the perspective of their administrators, charter schools have several distinctive features—especially their autonomy, parent involvement, cross-age teaching approaches, and alternative assessments. A major difference between charter schools and the comparisons is the frequency the former refer to their autonomy from the district, union, or both. In addition, charter school administrators often single out parent involvement, cross-age teaching, and use of alternative assessments. They mentioned these features at least three times more often than did the administrators of comparison schools. For example, one fourth of the charters use parents and others as instructors or aides, twice as many as in comparison schools.

Asked to compare their school on selected criteria with most other schools in the district, charter school administrators report that they have more money and are spending it more wisely. They say, too, that while they have less support from the district, they also are less constrained by union contracts. Conversely, by wide margins, comparison schools have more purchasing restrictions, and are less likely to say they have more money or to believe they are spending it more wisely. Also, administrators of comparison schools are correspondingly less likely to report lack of support from the district, or that they have less interference from union contracts.

Charter school administrators also believe that teachers have more influence and authority than teachers in other schools. With difference ratios between 2 to 1 and 3 to 1, the administrators attribute teachers in charter schools with more authority than teachers in comparison schools. But this authority brings more time-consuming responsibilities, and therefore, even though charter schools frequently use noncertified specialists, the teachers work longer hours. In addition to these differences, about two thirds of the charter school administrators, but only one fifth of the administrators of comparison schools, think it is *very true* that teachers more often coordinate lessons. Twice as many administrators in charters as in comparisons report that their teachers work longer hours, and that their schools use noncertified specialists.

Each charter school principal was asked to consider how curriculum and instruction practices used in his or her school compare with other schools in the district. They said that their teachers provide more experimental, thematic, individualized, and cooperative forms of instruction. The overwhelming majority believe their teachers experiment more than other teachers in the district. Most say that teachers use lessons that incorporate multiple subjects, are more likely to give individualized assignments, offer a wider variety of subjects, group students in cooperative learning groups and multi-age groups, and involve students in community service. Moreover, except for using ability grouping, charter schools are substantially different from comparison schools in these respects.

Finally, to find out still more about the affects of autonomy, we constructed a measure that enabled us to compare charter schools that have relatively high autonomy with those having relatively low autonomy. While the cell sizes associated with this analysis are small, the patterns support the conclusion that, even *among* charter schools, the amount of autonomy they are able to negotiate with the district does make a difference. Schools with high autonomy have more freedom and offer teachers more freedom, and they have fewer purchasing restrictions and more money for instruction, which the principals believe they are spending more wisely. Also, they can count on more cooperation from the district with respect to admissions and hiring. However, they also get less cooperation from unions. In addition, schools with high autonomy report using parent contracts more often than their low-autonomy counterparts, and they more often insist on parent participation. Also, they serve more at-risk students. At the same time, the two types of schools are very similar in many other respects.

# CHAPTER 3: TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS
## Who Teaches in Charter Schools?

*Marcella Dianda*

To date, much of the research on charter schools has focused on how they relate with their sponsors, their innovative organizational and governance structures, parents' roles in the schools, and racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds of parents and students. Little attention has been given to the teachers who work in charter schools. Who are they? What backgrounds and previous teaching experience do they bring to these new kinds of schools? How has being in a charter school changed their perceptions of their professional role and their instructional practice? How do they feel about their students?

This chapter explores these and other questions. As described in Chapter 1, surveys were returned by 230 teachers in 67 charter schools. For purposes of this analysis, respondents were divided into six categories on three criteria:

- the level of school in which the respondents teach: elementary (*N* = 158) and secondary (*N* = 69);
- the type of charter school in which they teach: existing schools that converted to charter status (*N* = 185) and newly created charter schools (*N* = 39); and
- the degree to which charter schools in which they teach are operationally autonomous from their sponsoring districts according to the measures described in Chapter 2: low-autonomy (*N* = 109) and high-autonomy (*N* = 86) schools[3].

## Characteristics of Charter School Teachers

The survey included several questions about the backgrounds and experience of the individuals who choose to teach in charter schools.

### *What Kinds of Preparation Do Charter School Teachers Have?*

Table 5 summarizes the academic preparation of charter school teachers. Several of the most prominent differences among teachers in different types of schools are selectively reported in figures that follow.

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[3] See Chapter 2: School Autonomy for a discussion of how we grouped respondents into low- or high-autonomy categories.

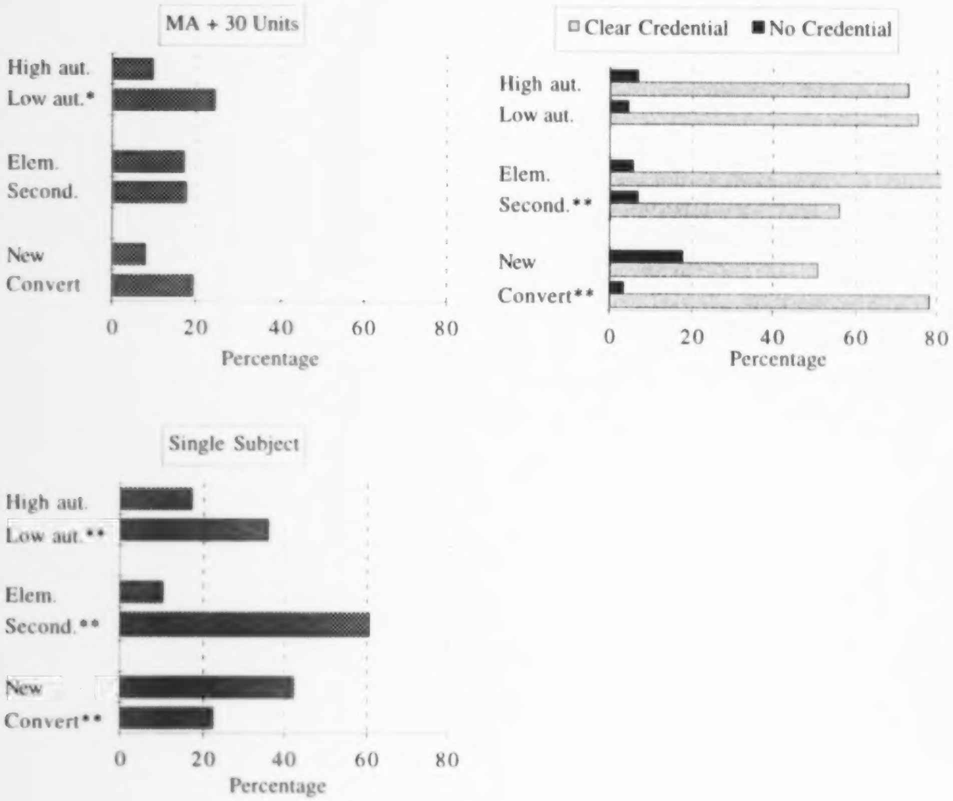
**Table 5**
*Charter School Teachers' Academic Degrees, and Teaching Credentials and Certificates*

| Degrees, credentials, and certificates | *N* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Highest degree | | |
| Less than BA | 3 | 1 |
| BA | 11 | 5 |
| BA + 1 year | 127 | 59 |
| MA | 35 | 16 |
| MA + 30 units | 38 | 18 |
| Doctorate | 3 | 1 |
| Credential | | |
| Clear | 167 | 73 |
| Preliminary | 39 | 17 |
| Emergency | 9 | 4 |
| None | 14 | 6 |
| Certificate | | |
| Multiple subject | 166 | 74 |
| Single subject | 58 | 6 |
| Special education | 16 | 7 |
| Other | 38 | 17 |

### *Teachers With "Higher Degrees" Are Concentrated in Converted and Low-Autonomy Charter Schools*

Figure 15 reports differences among teachers in each type of school listed, for selected items in Table 5. Teachers with the most academic preparation (especially MA degrees plus 30 units) tend to be (a) in converted schools (19%), rather than new schools (8%); and (b) in low-autonomy schools (25%), rather than high-autonomy schools (10%).

**Figure 15**
*Selected Qualifications of Charter School Teachers*



* p < .05 ** p < .01

*Teachers in New Schools and in Secondary Schools Are Less Likely To Hold Clear Credentials Than Those in Converted and Elementary Schools*

About one half of the teachers in new and secondary schools hold clear credentials, compared to more than three fourths of the teachers in other charter schools (see Figure 15). Also, relative to teachers in other categories, a higher percentage of those in new charter schools (18%) do not have a teaching certificate. In other charter schools, the percentage of noncertified teachers ranges from 4% to 7%. Finally, almost one fourth of the teachers in new charter schools hold preliminary credentials, and another 8% teach under an emergency credential (not shown).

*New Schools, Low-Autonomy Schools, and Secondary Schools Have More Teachers Certified in Only One Subject*

There are twice as many teachers who are certified in only one subject teaching in new rather than converted schools (42% vs. 22%) and in schools with low-autonomy than in high-autonomy schools (36% vs. 18%). Secondary schools are six times more likely to employ teachers certified in one subject than are elementary schools (61% vs. 10%) (see Figure 15).

## *What Teaching Experience Do They Have?*

Table 6 reports differences among the experience of teachers in the types of schools listed.

**Table 6**
*Charter School Teachers' Experience*

| | School type | | Autonomy level | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | New | Converted | High | Low |
| Years of teaching experience | | | | |
| 0-5 | 68 | 36 | 45 | 37 |
| 21 or more | 0 | 21 | 7 | 39 |
| Previously taught | | | | |
| This school | 3 | 67 | 37 | 66 |
| Private school | 15 | 2 | 10 | 2 |
| Public school outside district | 33 | 5 | 16 | 6 |
| Did not teach two years prior | 21 | 12 | 18 | 11 |

*By a Nearly 2 to 1 Ratio, New Charter Schools Employ More Beginning Teachers Than Do Converted Schools*

Almost one half of the teachers in the total sample (42%) had been teaching for 5 or fewer years when they joined the charter school staff. However, more than two thirds of the teachers in new schools (68%) had taught fewer than 5 years before joining the charter school staff. By comparison, only 36% of the converted schools' teaching staffs have less than 5 years of experience. The median years of experience among teachers in new schools is 4 years. None has had 21 or more years of experience.

### *Converted Schools and Schools With Low Autonomy Have More Highly Experienced Teachers*

Almost one fourth of the teachers in converted schools, and more than one third in low-autonomy schools, bring more than 20 years of experience to their charter school assignment. The median number of years of prior teaching experience is 9 years in converted schools and 11 years in low-autonomy schools.

### *Secondary-Level Teachers Have Less Experience Than Those Who Teach at the Elementary-School Level*

For secondary-level teachers, the median years of prior teaching experience is 5; the median for elementary teachers is double that. About one half of the secondary teachers (53%) have fewer than 5 years of teaching experience; 70% have been teaching for 10 years or less before beginning their charter school assignment (not shown).

### *Teachers Who Previously Taught in Private Schools, or Did Not Teach in the Previous Two Years, Are More Prevalent in New Schools and in High-Autonomy Schools*

Not only are the teachers in these two types of schools less experienced, they also come more frequently from outside the active ranks of public school teachers (see Table 6). Only 4% of the teachers in our sample came directly from private schools, but new schools employ nearly four times that number (15%), and high-autonomy schools employ more than twice that number (10%). Also, one in five teachers in new schools did not teach in the two years before joining the charter school—almost twice the number of such teachers in converted schools (12%). High-autonomy schools employ more of these teachers than those with low autonomy (18% vs. 11%).

### *New Schools and Schools With High Autonomy Hire More Teachers From Other Districts*

One in 10 teachers comes from outside the hiring district, but 1 in 3 teachers in new schools was recruited from another district. Also, there are more nondistrict teachers in high-autonomy schools compared to those in low-autonomy schools (16% vs. 6%).

### *Schools With Low Autonomy Are More Likely Than Their Counterparts With High Autonomy To Hire From the Pool of Teachers Who Previously Taught at the School*

Two thirds of the teachers in low-autonomy schools had taught at the school before it converted to a charter, compared to about 40% in high-autonomy schools.

## How Teachers Assess Their Professional Lives

One of the promised advantages of charter schools is additional opportunities for teachers to enhance their professional lives. Advocates suggest that teachers in charter schools are positioned to exert greater influence over decisions affecting the school, their professional role and practice, and their students. Presumably, charter school teachers also have more say in the way they organize their day, and in how they structure relationships with colleagues. Possible tradeoffs associated with this increased influence and responsibility, however, might include a heavier workload, more job-related stress, and less job security and job satisfaction. Therefore, we asked teachers to report on professional enhancements they enjoyed in a charter school, as well as possible disadvantages of working in these schools.

### *What Roles Do Charter School Teachers Perform?*

Teachers were asked to indicate on a 4-point scale how accurately each of a series of statements applies to them.

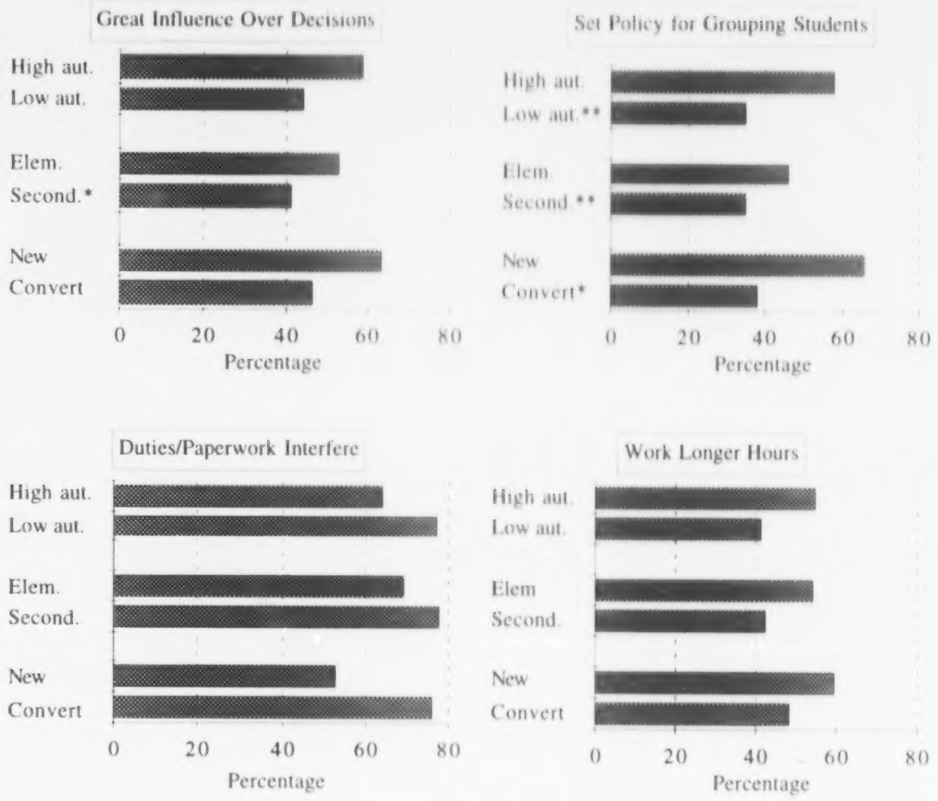
*Teachers Report More Influence Over Curriculum and Discipline Policy Than Over Grouping Students and In-Service Instruction*

Nearly one half of the teachers (49%) report having a high amount of influence over decisions in general, and in particular, more than one half exert a high amount of influence over curriculum and discipline policy. Fewer (about 40%) report the same degree of influence in the areas of grouping students for instruction and in-service content.

*Teachers in New Schools, in High-Autonomy Schools, and Those Teaching at the Elementary Level Consistently Report Having More Influence Than Their Counterparts*

While most of the differences are not large, there are consistent trends (see Figure 16). For each of the five items relating to decisionmaking, teachers in new schools, in schools with high autonomy, and in elementary schools report having more influence than teachers in the other schools. There are a few notable differences. For example, whereas two thirds of the respondents in new schools say they have high influence over setting policy on grouping students in classes, only 38% of the teachers in converted schools have a high amount of influence on this type of decision. Similarly, teachers working in schools with high autonomy have more influence over this sphere than those in low-autonomy schools (58% vs. 35%). Teachers in high-autonomy schools also have more say over discipline policy (69% vs. 50%) (not shown).

**Figure 16**
*Selected Roles of Charter School Teachers*



* p < .05 ** p < .01

### *Teachers in New Schools, in High-Autonomy Schools, and Those Teaching at the Elementary Level Consistently Report Heavier Workloads Than Their Counterparts*

By small but consistent margins, the same types of schools that give teachers opportunities to influence decisions also demand more of their time (see Figure 16). Compared to other charter school teachers, especially those in low-autonomy and secondary schools, higher percentages agree it is *very true* that they work much harder. In new schools, 59% of the teachers say they work longer hours. However, it is important to note that about one half of all teachers believe charter schools demand more work and longer hours. Even in secondary schools, and in schools with low autonomy, around 40% of the teachers make this assessment.

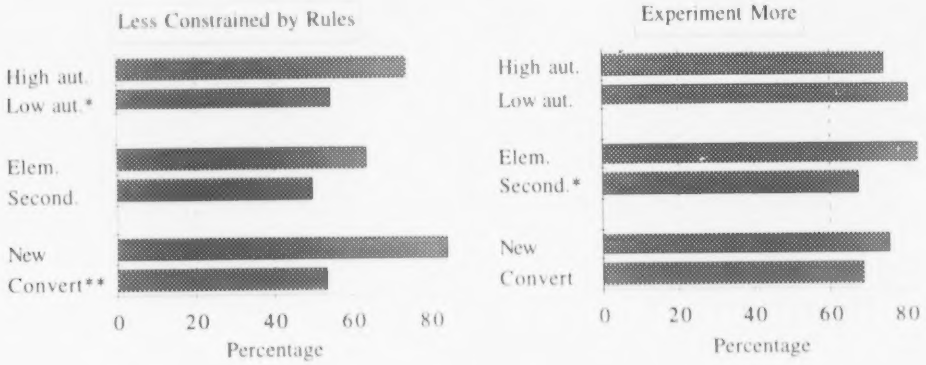
### *High Percentages of Teachers in All Types of Schools Report Heavy Paperwork Burdens*

Most teachers (71%) say that routine duties and paperwork interfere with their teaching. This problem is least bothersome to teachers in new charter schools, but even there, the majority (53%) report interference from this source (see Figure 16).

### *Teachers in New Schools, in High-Autonomy Schools, and Those Teaching at the Elementary Level Consistently Report Being Less Constrained by Rules*

Four fifths of the teachers in new schools (84%) say it is *very true/generally true* that they are less constrained by rules than teachers at other schools in their district. Fewer teachers in converted schools, but still the majority (53%), make that assessment. Three fourths of the teachers in high-autonomy schools (74%) feel equally unconstrained as do two thirds of those teaching in elementary schools (64%). About one half of the teachers in the remaining charter schools feel similarly unconstrained (see Figure 17).

**Figure 17**
*Charter School Teachers' Autonomy*



* p < .05 ** p < .01

### *A High Percentage of Teachers Say They Experiment More in the Classroom, Are Freer To Teach As They Wish, and Have More Say Over Content and the Subjects They Teach*

More than three out of four charter school teachers *experiment* more in the classroom (see Figure 17). This figure is only slightly lower in converted schools (69%) and secondary schools (68%). Level of school autonomy does not seem to have much affect on experimentation.

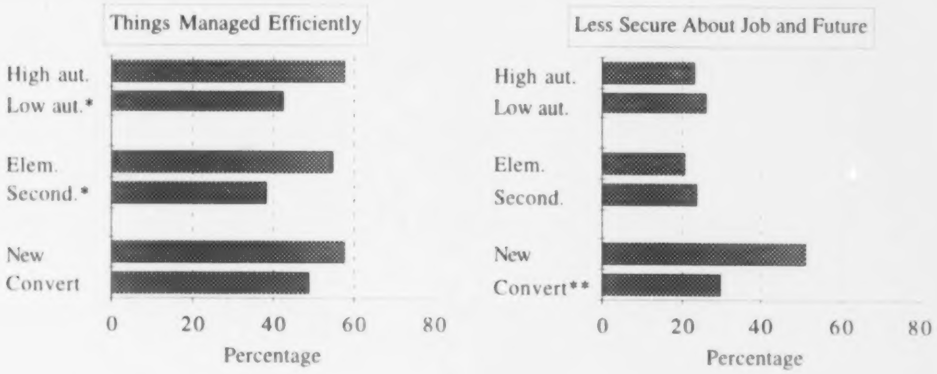
Interestingly, more teachers in schools with relatively low autonomy from the district say they experiment more than teachers in high-autonomy schools (81% vs. 75%).

Two thirds of all teachers also say they have more control over the content/subjects they teach, and most (59%) have freedom to teach as they wish. Again, teachers in low-autonomy schools are slightly more likely to say they are freer to teach as they wish than those in high-autonomy schools (66% vs. 55%) (not shown). This finding is consistent with SWRL's 1993-94 survey of these schools (see Dianda & Corwin, 1994), which indicated low-autonomy schools sought charter status to provide their teachers with greater instructional freedom. It is important, however, to recognize the difference among autonomy available to teachers, acting as a group, and the freedom of each individual teacher to teach as he or she wishes—because colleagues can place constraints on individuals within their group.

## *Are Teachers Satisfied With Their Jobs?*

Teachers are about equally divided over how well their school is being managed, and most feel relatively secure about their jobs (see Figure 18).

**Figure 18**
*Charter School Teachers' Satisfaction*



* p < .05 ** p < .01

### *One Half of the Teachers Feel Charter Status Enhances Overall School Management*

One half of the respondents report that it is *very true* or *generally true* that *things are managed* more efficiently at their charter school compared to other schools in the district. Across categories of teachers, their ratings of management efficiency range from highs of 58% (in new schools and high-autonomy schools) to lows of 38% (in secondary schools) and 43% (in low-autonomy schools) (see Figure 18).

### *Teachers in New Charters Are the Least Secure About Their Jobs and Their Futures, But Are Among the Most Satisfied With Their Jobs*

One in four teachers indicates that it is *very true* or *generally true* that they are less secure about their job and future. However, double that number (51%) of teachers in new schools are insecure (see Figure 18). Nevertheless, they are no less satisfied with their jobs than the average teacher. Sixty-six percent say they are more satisfied and feel they are doing their best teaching, compared to 62% of the total. Teachers in high-autonomy schools and in elementary schools express the highest levels of satisfaction on this measure (71% and 69%, respectively) (not shown).

### *With Few Exceptions, Most Teachers Share a Common Mission, Maintain High Standards, and Consider Themselves To Be Learners*

Table 7 reports the responses of charter school teachers to a series of questions about school climate. Consistently, three fourths of the teachers say they share a common mission with their colleagues, 83% say their colleagues have high standards, and 80% say that teachers are learning and seeking new directions.

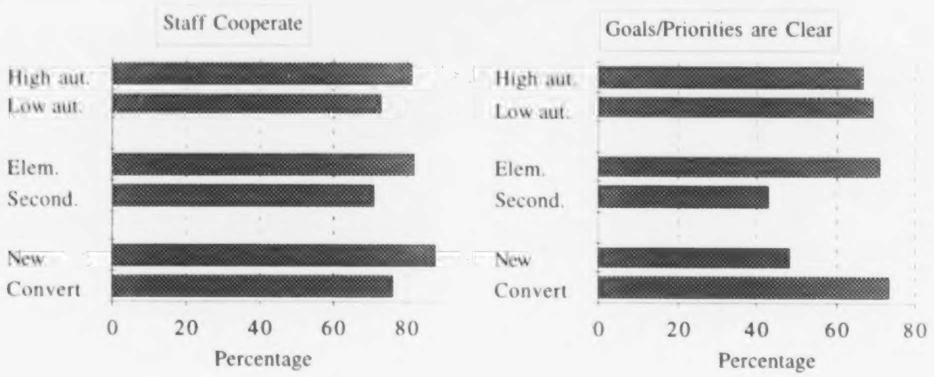
**Table 7**
*Charter School Teachers' Reports of the Professional Climate in Charter Schools*

| | Total | |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly agree | *N* | % |
| Colleagues share mission | 165 | 74 |
| Goals/priorities clear | 156 | 68 |
| Teachers learning/seeking | 182 | 80 |
| Staff cooperate | 176 | 78 |
| Staff have high standards | 187 | 83 |
| Look forward to workday | 169 | 74 |

*With Few Exceptions, Most Teachers Find Charter Schools Collegial Places To Work*

Consistently across all categories of teachers (not shown), three fourths of the respondents report a great deal of cooperative effort among staff members. The level of cooperation is exceptionally high in new schools (87%)—compared, for example, to secondary schools (71%) (see Figure 19). Comparably high percentages (ranging from 69% to 77%) also say they usually look forward to each workday.

**Figure 19**
*Charter School Teachers' Perceptions of School Climate*



*Most Teachers Also Understand the Schools' Goals, But Goals Appear To Be Less Clear in New And Secondary Schools*

Two thirds of the respondents report that the goals and priorities of their school are clear. However, there is some variation worth noting (see Figure 19). In particular, compared to respondents in other categories, far lower percentages of teachers in new schools and in secondary schools (48% and 43%, respectively) report being clear about the goals and priorities for the school.

## Classroom Practices

As charter schools mature and spread, interest is naturally shifting from issues related to funding and school organization to instructional practices, and ultimately to outcomes. The assumption is that, freed from burdensome rules, teachers will use the greater latitude to change their approaches to classroom instruction.

This section describes some of the classroom practices that teachers report using. The survey contained a list of innovative practices to which teachers were asked to respond. Undoubtedly, some of the different approaches teachers are taking are not represented on that list. Also, we did not conduct classroom observations to verify teachers' reports. Nevertheless, the teachers' responses provide an illuminating glimpse into some of the instructional practices being used in charter schools.

The following discussion focuses on what the majority of teachers are doing. Also, as context, teachers were asked to appraise the general academic ability of their students compared to students they had taught previously.

### *What Are Teachers Doing Differently?*

#### *The Most Prevalent Change Is Requiring Students To Build Portfolios of Their Best Work*

Six out of every 10 teachers say they ask students to build portfolios of their best work more frequently than the year before they taught at a charter school (see Table 8). This finding is consistent with our analysis of how schools plan to assess student outcomes. Many plan to use alternative assessment methods based on portfolios of student work.

**Table 8**
*Percentage of Teachers Saying They Now Use Each Practice More/Much More*

| Teaching practices | *N* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Students build portfolio | 121 | 61 |
| Coordinate lessons with other teacher | 96 | 49 |
| Students choose own books/projects | 95 | 48 |
| Interdisciplinary lessons | 93 | 47 |
| Small groups for problem solving | 80 | 45 |
| Computers for skills practice | 88 | 45 |
| Lessons addressing multiple learning style | 89 | 45 |
| Individualized assignments | 87 | 44 |
| Cross-age tutoring | 86 | 43 |
| Computers for publishing | 79 | 40 |
| Community experts come to class | 75 | 38 |
| Detailed feedback to students | 74 | 37 |
| Extensive student writing | 74 | 37 |
| Field trips | 70 | 35 |

*table continues*

| Teaching practices | *N* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Students present work | 73 | 32 |
| Students discuss values/ethics | 62 | 31 |
| Information-seeking outside school | 56 | 28 |
| Students do research | 51 | 26 |
| Modems to communicate/search | 21 | 11 |
| Students take commercial tests | 4 | 7 |

### *Nearly One Half of the Teachers More Frequently Employ "Key Instructional" Practices Directly Related To Organizing Students for Instruction*

Slightly fewer than one half of the teachers are now more frequently using cross-age tutoring (43%) and small student groups to solve problems (45%). Also, many teachers are providing more opportunities for students to select to work with various projects (48%) (see Table 8).

### *Nearly One Half of the Teachers More Frequently Report Reorganizing the Way in Which They Deliver Instruction*

Also, slightly fewer than one half of the teachers report using more:

- individualized assignments (44%);
- teaching lessons that combine several traditional subjects like science, math, and history (47%);
- lessons that combine several different teaching modalities to address students' different learning styles (45%); and
- lessons coordinated with other teachers (49%) (see Table 8).

### *Less Frequent Changes Include Outreach to the Community*

A little more than one third of the teachers more often use community experts in their classroom (38%). One in four reports having students search for information in out-of-school locations (28%), or collect data outside the school and draw conclusions from their research (26%) (see Table 8).

### *Teachers in New Schools, Elementary Schools, and High-Autonomy Schools Have Changed More Than Others*

In keeping with other trends in the data, teachers in new charter schools report changes in most areas of instructional practice. Also, the majority of teachers in elementary schools and in high-autonomy schools report using several practices more frequently now.

In contrast, teachers in converted, secondary, and low-autonomy schools have changed few of their practices (not shown).

However, these data must be interpreted cautiously. They do not mean that these charter schools were not innovative. Perhaps many of these teachers already were doing innovative things before joining charter schools.

### *Most Teachers Consider Charter Structure Essential or Valuable to Changed Practice*

Teachers were asked to indicate on a 4-point scale how important the charter school structure has been for facilitating the changes they have made (as reflected in the previous questions). With two exceptions, more than one half—and up to three fourths—of the respondents believe the charter school setting has been essential or valuable for the changed practices listed in Table 8. The charter school structure has been especially helpful for accommodating multiple learning styles among students (mentioned by 78% of the teachers); providing detailed feedback to students concerning their performance and teaching lessons across subject-area disciplines (74%); and coordinating lessons with other teachers and providing opportunities for more student field trips (73%) (see Table 9).

However, what seems more striking is that relatively few teachers consider the charter structure to be *essential* for the changes they have made. They view the charter-school setting as valuable but not essential for what they are doing.

**Table 9**
*How Essential or Valuable Is the Charter Structure for Changed Teaching Practices?*

| | Percentage | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teaching practices | Essential | Valuable | Total |
| Lessons addressing multiple learning styles | 35 | 44 | 78 |
| Detailed feedback to students | 41 | 34 | 74 |
| Interdisciplinary lessons | 23 | 51 | 74 |
| Field trips | 37 | 36 | 73 |
| Coordinate lessons with other teacher | 37 | 36 | 73 |
| Students build portfolios | 26 | 43 | 69 |
| Students present work | 18 | 51 | 69 |
| Cross-age tutoring | 21 | 47 | 68 |
| Students discuss values/ethics | 25 | 43 | 67 |
| Individualized assignments | 33 | 33 | 67 |
| Small groups for problem solving | 26 | 39 | 65 |
| Information-seeking outside school | 9 | 54 | 63 |
| Extensive student writing | 19 | 43 | 62 |
| Computers for publishing | 26 | 36 | 62 |
| Community experts come to class | 18 | 42 | 60 |
| Computers for skills practice | 23 | 35 | 58 |
| Students choose own books/projects | 19 | 38 | 57 |
| Modems to communicate/search | 19 | 29 | 48 |
| Students do research | 16 | 30 | 46 |

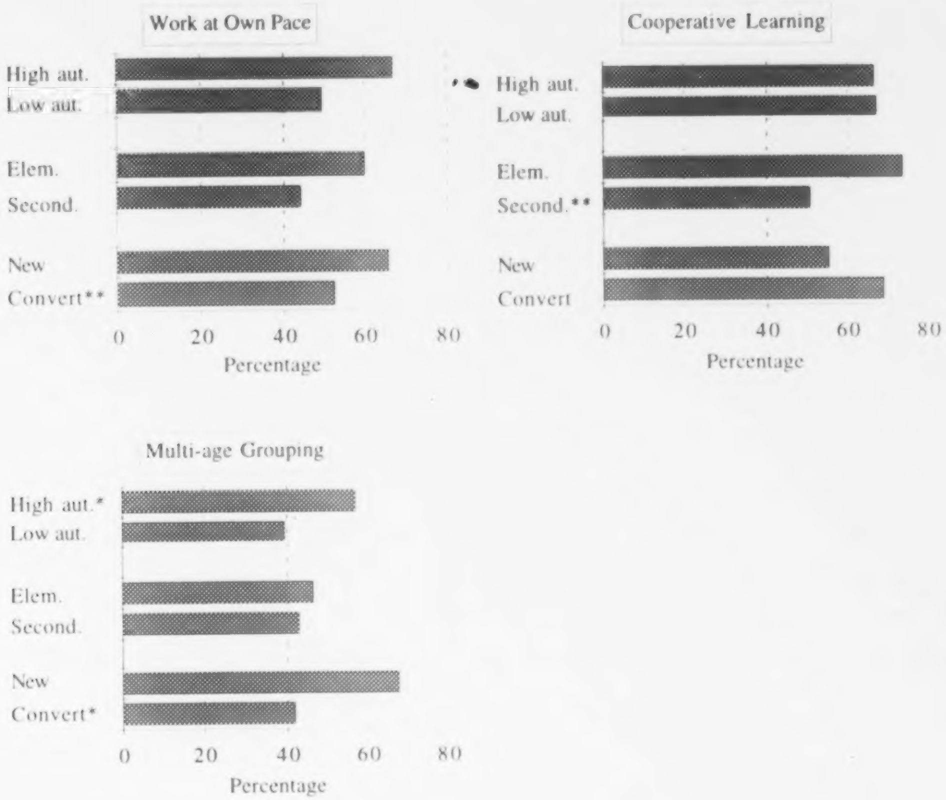
## *How Do Teachers Group Students?*

Teachers were asked about ways in which students are grouped for instruction, about their students' general academic ability, and how well students like school.

### *Cooperative Learning Is The Most Common Way Students Are Grouped for Instruction, Especially in Elementary Schools*

Two thirds of the teachers report using cooperative learning more than other teachers in their district. Even more teachers in elementary schools (74%) use this practice, compared to only one half of the secondary teachers (see Figure 20).

**Figure 20**
*Charter School Teachers' Classroom Practices*



* p < .05 ** p < .01

### *Most Teachers Allow Students To Work at Their Own Pace, Especially in New, Elementary, and High-Autonomy Schools*

Slightly more than one half (55%) of the respondents report that, compared to other teachers in the district, they are more likely to give students assignments that allow them to work at their own pace. Again, reflecting a trend in the data, this practice is used more often by teachers in high-autonomy schools (67%), in new schools (66%), and in elementary schools (60%) (see Figure 20).

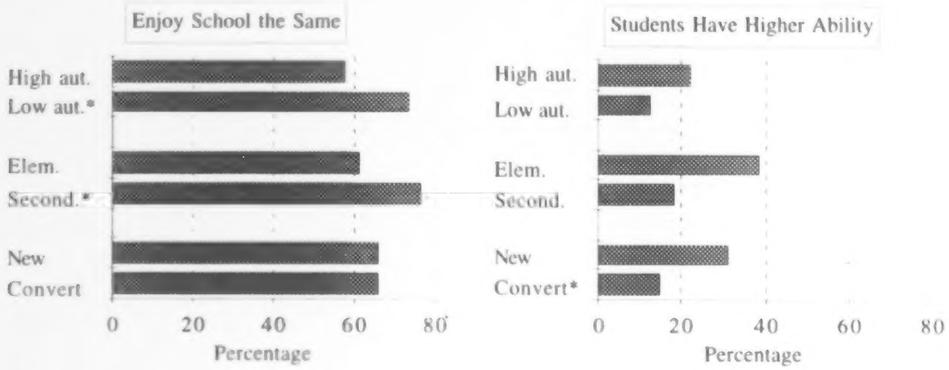
In keeping with findings pertaining to cooperative learning and self-paced student work, almost one half of the teachers use multi-age student grouping. Consistent with other patterns, multi-age grouping is used more frequently in new schools (67%) and in high-autonomy schools (57%) (see Figure 20).

## *How Do Teachers Perceive Their Students?*

### *Overwhelmingly, Teachers Perceive the Academic Ability of Their Students as Comparable To Students They Have Taught Previously*

Over three fourths of the teachers in our sample (78%) consider their current students' ability no different than students they have taught before. However, consistent with other findings, about one third of the teachers in new schools (31%) and in elementary schools (38%) believe their current students have higher ability than other students they have taught (see Figure 21).

**Figure 21**
*Charter School Teachers' Perceptions of Their Students*



* $p < .05$

### *Most Teachers Do Not Think Their Students Enjoy the Charter School More Than They Enjoyed Their Previous School*

With only minor variations among the teachers in different types of schools, two thirds of the respondents estimate that their students enjoy school about the same as other students they have previously taught (see Figure 21).

## Summary and Discussion

Our examination of teachers' backgrounds, their roles in charter schools, and changes they have made in their teaching practices provides ample reason to believe that charter schools are recruiting teachers who are trying to change their classroom practices and take new approaches.

## *Teachers' Backgrounds*

Unlike many states, California permits charter schools to employ as teachers individuals who do not have a teaching credential, or who may not even have a college degree. By law, the schools may establish their own list of qualifications for teaching positions, their own hiring criteria, and terms of employment. Consequently, there are wide variations in teacher qualifications among the different types of schools examined. Charter school teachers are overwhelmingly college graduates, and many have MAs or MAs plus 30 credits. However, those with higher degrees are found more often in converted and low-autonomy charter schools. Teachers in new schools and in secondary schools are less likely to hold clear credentials than those in converted schools and in elementary schools. New, low-autonomy, and secondary schools have more teachers certified in only one subject.

The teachers who work in the *new schools*, and those teaching in charters that operate *autonomously* from their sponsoring districts, also bring different experience and academic backgrounds to their work than teachers in other charter schools. First, they have taught for fewer years before joining the school staffs. Second, a higher percentage hold preliminary or emergency credentials. Third, a higher percentage either do not have a credential or have not taught in either of the two years preceding their current employment. Finally, more so than other charter school teachers, they tend to be out-of-district hires, or individuals who had private school teaching experience.

From the respondents' answers, it appears that the most "charter-like" schools, which have less traditional staffing patterns, are new charter schools, high-autonomy schools, and to a slightly less extent, charter schools enrolling elementary-age students. With respect to their experience and academic backgrounds, teachers in new and high-autonomy schools have taught for fewer years before joining the school staffs. A higher percentage hold either preliminary or emergency credentials, do not have a credential, or have not taught in either of the two years preceding their current employment. Moreso than other charter school teachers, they tend to come from out of the district, or from private schools.

## *Teacher Roles*

The teachers report some advantages to teaching in charter schools. First, most perceive they have had a great deal of influence on school decisions, especially those related to curriculum and student discipline. Second, many report being less constrained by rules than other teachers in their district. This is especially true of teachers in new and high-autonomy schools. Third, they enjoy considerable freedom to choose what to teach to experiment, and to teach as they wish. Fourth, they regard charter schools as collegial environments characterized by cooperation among teachers who look forward to going to work each day. Finally, for the most part, high percentages of respondents share with their colleagues a vision of their school's mission, have a clear understanding of the goals the school is striving to implement, and feel their colleagues maintain high standards and are continuing to learn and grow.

The downside of teaching at charter schools clearly includes a paperwork burden that most feel interferes with their teaching. Perhaps some of this paperwork is necessary for the school to receive federal and state funds for which they are accountable. In addition, districts often require paperwork in connection with their oversight responsibilities.

Of special interest are teachers who work in new and high-autonomy schools. High percentages of these teachers report that charter status has enhanced overall school management, that they have great influence over decisions at their schools, and that they are satisfied with their jobs. However, these advantages are coupled with the highest workload and the greatest amount of job insecurity.

Compared to other teachers, more who work in new and high-autonomy schools report that charter school status has enhanced overall school management, that they have great influence over decisions at their schools, and that they are satisfied with their jobs. However, these same teachers also have the heaviest workloads and the greatest amount of job insecurity.

### *Classroom Practices*

Working in a charter school seems to have changed the way teachers organize and deliver instruction. Based on their own reports of changes they have made in their instructional practices, the most innovative teachers are in new schools, schools with high autonomy, and elementary schools. Not surprisingly, the major area of changed practice is assessment. Cognizant of provisions in California's charter law and the schools' own charters that hold them accountable for student outcomes, teachers report increased emphasis on portfolio assessment, and less frequently use commercially published tests (except in secondary schools where such tests are still prominent).

Based on the number of practices teachers report having changed, as well as the practices themselves, it appears that the new schools are the most innovative. Elementary schools and high-autonomy charters also appear to be innovative. In contrast, reports from teachers in secondary charter schools indicate little in the way of changed practice from what they did before becoming charter school teachers.

With respect to specific innovations, teachers report extensive use of cooperative learning, especially in elementary schools, and use of multi-age grouping patterns and self-pacing by students, both of which are compatible with cooperative learning. The emerging pattern suggests student-centered instruction. This could well have the achievement outcomes the schools seek when these grouping patterns are coupled with increased use of cross-age tutoring, individualized student assignments, and lessons that combine different teaching modalities/subject areas, and are coordinated with other teachers.

Finally, according to the teachers, students in charter schools are not very different from students they taught previously in terms of academic ability or enjoyment of school.

But, is charter school status essential for the changes being made in the classrooms of the schools in our sample? Many teachers say they have changed since joining their charter school. Some types of schools seem to have more teachers who have changed than others. However, these patterns must be interpreted cautiously. One caveat is that teachers who have not changed might already have been doing innovative things before joining the charter. Another consideration is that relatively few teachers consider charter status *essential* for the changes they have made. Therefore, while charter schools seem to facilitate change, we can't be sure they are causing it.

# CHAPTER 4: INNOVATIONS
## What Are the Schools Doing?

*John Flaherty*

One of the foremost arguments in favor of charter schools in public education is the increase in innovation that will surely follow from the autonomy granted to charter schools. Freed from onerous state and district regulations, the argument goes, charters will be able to develop and implement innovative teaching programs as they see fit, customizing education to meet the needs of their specific learners. Presumably, a valuable by-product will be successful examples of alternative strategies.

## The Context

Recent analyses of legislation from the first 11 states that approved charter schools show that the search for innovative teaching methods was foremost on the minds of legislators in passing charter school legislation. In fact, in 9 of the 11 states with charter schools, a common purpose of the charter school legislation was to promote innovative teaching methods (Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995). In Minnesota, for example, schools must demonstrate that they plan to implement some innovative teaching methods before they are even considered for charter status. And in many other states, including California, legislators have given preference to schools that are planning to serve students who have traditionally been underserved by the public school system.

The California law (Senate Bill 1448, Section 47601, 1992) specifically states that charter schools will be established, among other things to:

- increase learning opportunities for all pupils, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving;
- encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods; and
- create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.

However, early reviews of successes and failures associated with such changes have been mixed. A 1995 U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report lauds the diversity of charter school programs nationwide, which include cross-age grouping, thematic teaching, and the targeting of certain populations. On the other hand, SWRL's previous survey report (Dianda & Corwin, 1994), among others, documents the serious challenges that new charter schools are facing—challenges capable of inhibiting innovation. Moreover, some critics are claiming that much of what is being implemented in charter schools around the country could be accomplished within existing public schools by using good site-based decisionmaking plans (National Education Association, 1995).

## *Objectives and Procedures*

This chapter describes the types of innovations being planned and implemented in California's charter schools and ponders whether these schools are serving as models for change, as is hoped by many charter school advocates. Charter schools will be compared to the sample of other nearby public schools the students would have attended had they not enrolled in a charter school. In addition, charter schools with varying levels of autonomy will be compared to determine whether the degree of autonomy has any impact on the amount of innovation.

Information about the approaches charter schools are taking, and the innovations they are implementing, was obtained in the following manner. Each charter school administrator was sent a customized questionnaire listing the innovations that, according to our information, were being planned for their specific school. This list was generated from two principal sources: (a) our examination of each school's charter application; and (b) information elicited from charter school administrators on our first-phase survey (as described in Chapter 1). In addition, charter school administrators were given an opportunity to add any new or recently planned innovations to this list. After each innovation, they were asked about its implementation status (whether it has been fully or partially implemented, or is still in the planning stages), and whether they believe charter status is necessary for this innovation to be implemented. Finally, the respondents were asked whether they would recommend that other charter schools implement similar innovations.

We caution that the innovations we have identified in this way are not necessarily indicative of the full range of new teaching alternatives being explored. Perhaps some administrators forgot to add some innovations. Other administrators may not have considered an approach to be particularly innovative for their school—especially if the school was doing innovative things in the past—while others might have treated the same approach as an innovation in their setting. This analysis only intends to show, in general terms, the *types* of approaches and innovations being implemented in California charter schools.

## **Findings**

After a careful review of the innovations administrators said their schools are implementing, we classified them and developed a typology.

### *What Types of Approaches Are Charter Schools Using?*

Table 10 shows the major categories of approaches that have been planned for or implemented in California's charter schools.

**Table 10**
*Percentage of Charter Schools Using Each Type of Approach*

| Type of approach | Example | % of charter schools | % of comparison schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Most frequently used approaches | | |
| Instructional | Use of projects or technology for learning | 78 | 3 |
| Governmental | Site-based governance | 72 | 16 |
| Parental | Increased parent participation | 67 | 14 |
| Assessment | Alternative assessment | 56 | 0 |
| Course structure | Thematic instruction | 53 | 16 |
| Community | Community partnerships | 44 | 11 |
| Grouping | Cross-age grouping, mainstreaming | 44 | 14 |
| Scheduling | Changes in daily or weekly schedule | 44 | 11 |
| Students | Targeting at-risk youth, LEP students | 44 | 5 |
| | Other approaches | | |
| Course content | Emphasis on arts, focus on technology | 36 | 35 |
| Organizational | Realigning staff, adding grades | 33 | 35 |
| Teachers | Increased teacher development | 33 | 5 |
| Class size | Reduced class size | 25 | 0 |
| Team teaching | Teachers with single cohort of students | 22 | 8 |
| Staffing | Use of noncertified staff | 17 | 0 |
| Fiscal | Decategorization of funds, grant monies | 14 | 19 |
| Counseling | Conflict management | 11 | 19 |
| Home study | Teaching students at home | 8 | 0 |
| Student grouping | Cooperative learning | 6 | 0 |

### *The Most Common Innovations Are Related to (a) Instructional Strategies—Use of Projects Or Technology for Learning; (b) Site-Based Governance; and (c) Parent Participation*

More than two thirds of the schools are implementing three types of innovations: (a) instructional strategies—use of projects or technology for learning; (b) site-based governance; and (c) parent participation. In addition, more than one half of them are: (a) using alternative assessments and (b) thematic instruction strategies. And, nearly one half either have, or are planning to: (a) increase ties to the community; (b) establish alternative ways to group students; (c) make changes to the school schedule; and (d) target specific student populations.

### *Several of These Most Prevalent Approaches Seem To Require Fundamental Structural Changes In the Way the School Functions and How It Relates to the Community and Its Client Constituencies*

Structural changes include site-based governance, parental participation, increased ties to the community, and targeting specific student populations.

### *Several of the Most Prevalent Changes Require Major Changes in Relationships Between Teachers And Students*

The others at the top of the list seem to require major changes in relationships between teachers and students. These changes include instructional strategies, alternative assessments, thematic instruction strategies, and alternative student groupings.

While less prevalent, charter schools also are developing new types of courses in the arts or technology, placing more emphasis on teacher development, and taking steps to reduce class size. Several of these less prevalent innovations also involve *structural changes* and *changes in relationships* among members of the school, for example; staff organization and adding grade levels, changes in fiscal procedures, team teaching with a single cohort of students, using noncertified staff, conflict management, cooperative learning, teaching students at home.

### *Charter Schools Are Implementing More Innovations Than Comparison Schools*

Table 10 includes the percentages of comparison schools that identified similar innovations as distinctive characteristics of their programs. None of the top nine innovations most frequently being used in charter schools is as prevalent in other nearby public schools. For example, only 3% of the latter report instructional innovations; only 16% are working on site-based governance; only 14% have increased parent participation; and no comparative school identified alternative assessments. More than one half of the charters are implementing these types of changes.

However, there is little difference between the rates at which charters and the comparison schools are implementing course content (e.g., emphasis on arts, focus on technology) and organizational changes, such as realigning staff and adding grade levels. About one third of both types of schools are involved in these kinds of changes.

### *What Specific Innovations Are Being Implemented?*

Even larger differences in the approaches being taken by charter schools and non-charter schools become apparent when the innovations are divided into subcategories. For example, a closer look at changes in governmental approaches reveals that what charters are actually doing is including teachers and parents in school governance (see Table 11). In contrast, no comparison school reports establishing such structures. Using parents as instructors, establishing partnerships with community agencies, targeting certain populations of students, and developing new teacher evaluation strategies also are exclusive to the charter schools in our sample.

**Table 11**
*Percentage of Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools Implementing Each Type of Innovation*

| Type of innovation | Specific changes | % of charter schools | % of comparison schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| Instructional | Experimental learning | 8 | 0 |
| | Individualized learning | 31 | 0 |
| | Project-based learning | 11 | 0 |
| | Use of simulations | 3 | 0 |
| | Use of technology for learning | 36 | 3 |
| Governmental | Site-based governance | 25 | 16 |
| | Parents in school governance | 50 | 0 |
| | Teachers in school governance | 3 | 0 |
| Parental | Parents as instructors | 28 | 0 |
| | Parent participation—general | 50 | 14 |
| Assessments | Alternative assessments | 44 | 0 |
| | Performance-based assessments | 11 | 0 |
| | Graduation/learning standards | 6 | 0 |
| Community | Community service | 36 | 11 |
| | Community partnerships | 17 | 0 |
| Grouping | Multi-age grouping | 36 | 14 |
| | Mainstreaming students | 11 | 3 |
| Scheduling | After-school scheduling | 14 | 0 |
| | Changes in daily schedule | 17 | 5 |
| | Changes in weekly schedule | 8 | 5 |
| | Changes in yearly schedule | 11 | 0 |

*table continues*

| Type of innovation | Specific changes | % of charter schools | % of comparison schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| Target population | Targeting Anglo students | 3 | 0 |
| | Targeting at-risk students | 11 | 0 |
| | Targeting bilingual students | 19 | 3 |
| | Targeting high-achieving students | 8 | 0 |
| | Targeting low SES students | 3 | 0 |
| | Targeting special education students | 8 | 0 |
| | Targeting vocational students | 6 | 0 |
| Teachers | Teacher professional development | 22 | 5 |
| | Use of teacher portfolio | 3 | 0 |
| | Teacher evaluations | 8 | 0 |
| | Teacher evaluations by peers | 8 | 0 |

### *The Variety of Innovations Underscores the Diversity That Exists Across Charter Schools*

Many different innovations are occurring in charter schools. For example, innovations in student instruction vary from using technology to instruct children (36%), and developing individualized learning plans (31%), to the use of project-based (11%) and experimental learning (8%) strategies. A vast array of scheduling changes also is occurring at charter schools. At various schools, after-school sessions are being added (14%); the school day, or class sessions, is being lengthened (17%); and the number of days in the school year is increasing (11%) (see Table 11).

### *Along With Changes in the Structure and Instructional Strategies, Some Charter Schools Are Targeting Specific Populations for Learning, as Was Hoped for by Legislators*

One fifth of the charters report targeting bilingual students, and another 11% are preparing to serve at-risk students. Students qualifying for special education placement, students seeking vocational education, and students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds also are being served by a small number of charter schools. A few charter school administrators also indicate that they are targeting high-achieving students (8%) and Anglo students (3%) (see Table 11).

*The Roles of Teachers at Charter Schools Differ From Those Reported by Comparison School Administrators*

In addition to assuming more responsibility for school governance, as mentioned before, charter school teachers also are more involved in professional development activities. More than one in five respondents report that increased teacher and staff development is a distinctive feature of their school's program, while smaller numbers of schools are implementing innovative teacher evaluation standards, including portfolio reviews and peer evaluation (see Table 11).

## *What Is the Implementation Status of the Innovations?*

Charter school administrators were asked to describe the implementation status of each innovation at their charter school.

*Many of the Innovations Described Had Been Fully or Partially Implemented at the Time Of The Survey*

In all but a few instances, the following innovations have been implemented: (a) increasing parent involvement at the school; (b) alternative assessments; (c) student grouping; (d) team teaching; and (e) reduction in class size (see Table 12). With the exception of parent involvement, these changes are internal to the school and classrooms. However, the innovations that require more extensive structural reform, such as those involving reorganization and new partnerships with the outside community, understandably will take more time and were still being planned.

**Table 12**
*Implementation Status of Various Innovations*

| Type of innovation | "Full" or "partial" implementation | In planning, or not yet implemented |
|---|---|---|
| Instructional | 86 | 14 |
| Governmental | 80 | 21 |
| Parental | 100 | 0 |
| Assessment | 91 | 8 |
| Course structure | 75 | 25 |
| Community | 67 | 33 |
| Grouping | 95 | 5 |
| Scheduling | 88 | 12 |

*table continues*

| Type of innovation | "Full" or "partial" implementation | In planning, or not yet implemented |
|---|---|---|
| Students | 83 | 17 |
| Course content | 88 | 12 |
| Organizational | 59 | 41 |
| Teachers | 82 | 19 |
| Class size | 91 | 9 |
| Team teaching | 100 | 0 |
| Staffing | 70 | 25 |
| Fiscal | 33 | 67 |
| Counseling | 100 | 0 |
| Home study | 100 | 0 |
| Cooperative learning | 100 | 0 |

## *How Important Is Charter Status for Innovation?*

Tables 10 and 11 indicate that many of the innovations being implemented or planned by charter schools also are being accomplished in some of the comparison schools. To estimate the role that a school's charter status plays in fostering innovation, we asked the administrators to rate the importance of charter status in accomplishing their innovations. Table 13 shows the range of responses—from essential to not needed—for each type of innovation.

**Table 13**
*Importance of Charter Status in Achieving Innovations*

| | Charter status is ... | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of innovation | Essential | Valuable | Helpful | Not needed |
| Staffing | 100 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Fiscal | 75 | 25 | 0 | 0 |
| Class size | 60 | 30 | 0 | 10 |
| Scheduling | 52 | 24 | 10 | 14 |
| Parental | 50 | 25 | 13 | 13 |
| Counseling | 50 | 25 | 0 | 25 |
| Governmental | 48 | 26 | 4 | 22 |
| Organizational | 47 | 27 | 7 | 20 |

*table continues*

| | Charter status is ... | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type of innovation | Essential | Valuable | Helpful | Not needed |
| Teachers | 36 | 50 | 0 | 14 |
| Home study | 33 | 33 | 33 | 0 |
| Team teaching | 25 | 38 | 13 | 25 |
| Students | 24 | 29 | 18 | 29 |
| Assessment | 22 | 48 | 26 | 4 |
| Community | 21 | 21 | 36 | 21 |
| Course content | 18 | 41 | 29 | 12 |
| Grouping | 16 | 37 | 37 | 11 |
| Course structure | 11 | 26 | 32 | 32 |
| Instructional | 27 | 41 | 14 | 18 |

### *With a Few Exceptions, Most Respondents Believe Charter Status Is Essential or Valuable for the Innovations They Are Implementing*

However, the majority consider it *essential* only with respect to the following six types of innovations: staffing (using noncertified personnel), fiscal changes, smaller class sizes, scheduling, parent involvement, and counseling. In particular, there is consensus that the charter is essential for implementing staffing changes, and three fourths of the respondents believe it is essential for implementing fiscal changes.

### *On the Other Hand, Many Administrators Do Not Believe That Charter Status Is Needed To Implement the Innovations Their School Is Implementing*

With the exception of staffing and fiscal changes, sizable percentages—between one third and one tenth of the respondents—do not think charter status is needed to implement many of the innovations found at charter schools.

## *Autonomy and Innovation*

Some schools without charters have been promoting parent participation, developing community partnerships, and grouping students across ages or grades. However, the tables have shown that these innovations, and others, are far more prevalent among charter schools. Could this be because charter schools are more autonomous, and therefore freer to engage in such practices as they see fit? Past research has shown the link between autonomy and innovation

(Wohlstetter, Wenning, & Briggs, 1995), and this is surely the relationship legislators wanted. To explore this relationship, charter schools were divided according to their scores on the autonomy scale described in Chapter 2, to see if level of autonomy has any effect on the amount of innovation.

Table 14 shows the percentages of schools with high and low autonomy that are incorporating each type of innovation into their school program.

**Table 14**
*Percentage of Schools With High and Low Autonomy Implementing Each Innovation*

| Type of innovation | High autonomy ($N = 14$) | Low autonomy ($N = 16$) |
|---|---|---|
| Parent involvement | 36 | 19 |
| Student assessment | 28 | 25 |
| Government structure | 28 | 33 |
| Instructional strategies | 28 | 39 |
| Community service | 22 | 14 |
| Student grouping | 22 | 17 |
| Scheduling | 22 | 11 |
| Class size reduction | 17 | 3 |
| Course structure | 17 | 25 |
| Target populations | 17 | 17 |
| Organizational change | 14 | 11 |
| Teacher roles | 14 | 14 |
| Counseling | 11 | 0 |
| Team teaching | 11 | 8 |
| Course content | 8 | 22 |
| Staffing | 8 | 3 |
| Fiscal | 6 | 8 |
| Home study | 3 | 6 |
| School culture | 3 | 0 |

### *Schools With High Autonomy Are Introducing Changes in Parent Involvement, Scheduling, And Smaller Classes More Frequently Than Those With Low Autonomy*

High-autonomy schools are promoting parent involvement and introducing scheduling changes twice as frequently as low-autonomy schools. They also are more often taking steps to reduce class size by a ratio of 5 to 1. However, the differences are negligible with respect to most of the other types of innovations. We know from our past research that the most autonomous schools have had the most adversarial relations with their districts (Dianda & Corwin, 1994). Perhaps this tension faced by autonomous schools has impeded their progress.

## Summary and Discussion

In this analysis we have allowed the respondents to define what they consider to be an innovation. Most of the innovations the respondents identified have been adopted by other schools, including at least some of the comparison schools in our sample. This raises questions about how important charter status is in promoting innovation. Indeed, between one third and one tenth of the respondents say they could do what they are doing without charter status. However, we have observed a much higher rate of adoption in charter schools, which suggests to us that charter status is at least very helpful. The majority of respondents believe that charter status is essential for some types of innovations, most notably staffing changes involving the use of noncertified personnel and fiscal changes. The majority also consider it essential for smaller class sizes, scheduling, parent involvement, and counseling. Moreover, charter school proponents have argued that, unlike an invention, an innovation is not new to the world. Nor does being innovative mean discarding what already is working well (Fitzgerald, 1995).

What is clear is that there are at least nine types of innovations that are much more common in charter schools than in our comparison samples that do not operate under a charter. The most common ones are related to (a) instructional strategies—use of projects or technology for learning; (b) site-based governance; and (c) parent participation. Several of these most prevalent approaches seem to require rather fundamental structural changes in the way the school functions and how it relates to the community and its client constituencies. Several others require major changes in relationships between teachers and students. Moreover, none of the top nine innovations most frequently being used in charter schools are as prevalent in other nearby public schools.

Perhaps this high rate of innovation can be attributed to the context in which charter schools operate. Proponents argue that innovative schools are fostered by a commonly accepted school mission and philosophy that supports experimentation and that the outcome is more effective when several innovations are being implemented together (Fitzgerald, Colorado Children's Campaign, 1995). But probably the keys, as documented in Chapters 2 and 3, are that charter schools (a) have more freedom than the comparison schools in our sample, and (b) recruit highly dedicated teachers. This conjecture is supported by some crucial differences among the charters themselves. High-autonomy schools are promoting parent involvement and introducing scheduling changes twice as frequently as low-autonomy schools, and by a ratio of 5 to 1, more often they are taking steps to reduce class size. While the differences are negligible with respect to most of the other types of innovations, it appears that autonomy does make a difference for some innovations.

At the very least, it would appear that charter school legislation has, in the words of one charter school administrator, "taken the handcuffs off the principal, the teacher, and the parents," thus paving the way for more innovative school programs (Wallis, 1994).

# CHAPTER 5: PARENT INVOLVEMENT
## How Do Parents Participate?[4]

*Ronald G. Corwin and Henry J. Becker*

Many charter schools in California and other states are striving to involve parents in their programs. Some are trying to build an integral school community in which parents play numerous roles in the daily life of schools. In many schools, parent involvement is much more than simply a requirement to volunteer assistance or to help with their child's homework. Parents are seen as central adults in a more inclusive school community—participants who share time and expertise with the school's students as a whole.

### The Importance of Parent Involvement

Researchers and practitioners increasingly recognize that a close-knit community, linking families and schools, has important benefits for improving student commitment to schoolwork and the academic outcomes that follow. For instance, a number of empirical studies have found that students whose parents are involved with their learning at home have higher academic achievement, net of socioeconomic factors. This is particularly so when teachers orchestrate the parent involvement (Bryk, Lee, & Smith, 1990). Homework is a vehicle that promotes such collaboration, and there is evidence that the amount of homework teachers assign correlates positively with a school's standardized test scores (Namboodiri, Corwin, & Dorsten, 1993). Coleman (1987) has suggested that when parents have functional relations with their children's schools and support the school through home-based and school-based activities, "social capital" is created that produces normative support and legitimization for teachers' demands and more positive feelings on the part of children toward the school.

Epstein describes the ideal family-school relationship as a partnership where both school and family recognize, respect, and support each other. In practice, such partnerships can and must take different forms, as each family chooses how it will participate (Epstein, 1992a; Muller & Kerbow, 1993). Some parents may choose to focus on the primary needs of their child and turn to the school for assistance in doing so. Others concentrate on providing learning activities at home. Some families may wish to volunteer their services as aides, clerical workers, fund-raisers, and the like. Still, others want to influence or control important policy decisions.

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[4] Parts of this chapter have been adapted from Becker, H. J., Nakagawa, K., & Corwin, R. G. (1995, April). *Parent involvement contracts in California's charter schools* (occasional paper). Los Alamitos, CA: Southwest Regional Laboratory.

94

## What Is Parent Involvement?

The relationship between parents and schools can be described as a profile of *participation* and *influence*, or, how extensively they participate in the school, and their ability to control or influence the school's policies and activities (Corwin & Wagenaar, 1976; Corwin, 1987, pp. 174-192). This configuration differs from school to school. For example, in one school there may be high rates of parent participation, but the parents involved may not have much influence on the school's policies or activities. In another school, a select few parents might have full control over a few critical decisions, such as selecting the principal. The final balance, in turn, depends upon the ability of parents to gain *access* to the school, to win *acceptance* as a viable participant, and to play *influential* policymaking roles (Gamson, 1975). Each of these factors is briefly described below.

### *Access*

School districts use bureaucratic structures consisting of rules and procedures, hierarchies of authority, complex divisions of labor, rigid schedules, and professional authority. Such structures can create barriers that can discourage parent involvement (Corwin & Wagenaar, 1976). Therefore, teachers and parents should be freer to associate more closely in schools that operate autonomously from the district and are thus free from such constraints. Then, what kinds of roles do parents assume within autonomous schools? Below we have identified three types of participation roles and two types of influence roles.

### *Participation Roles*

1. *The client role.* Parent(s) ask the school for assistance or advice pertaining to specified issues or problems. To play this role, citizens must have become aware of a problem and be ready to initiate the relationship. The organization then can reserve the right to determine if the request is legitimate and when and how it will respond to the request.

2. *The implementor role.* The school initiates this relationship. A group is called upon to collaborate in implementing an existing policy or procedure. A decision already has been made. The group is asked to assist in carrying it out (e.g., with a fund-raising campaign, or, to provide volunteer assistance for programs and services identified by the school).

3. *The consumer role.* Again, the school takes the initiative by establishing programs and communicating information through the mass media, speeches, telephone calls, and personal visits. Parents are treated as passive consumers of the school's programs, who may either choose them or

decline. They also may be treated as passive consumers of information as school officials attempt to persuade them to use their services.

*Influence Roles*

1. *The consultant role.* This relationship is the reverse of the client role. The organization seeks advice from a parent or group of parents. There are at least four ways citizens can influence policies within this type of role: (a) by providing information, (b) by interpreting events, (c) by giving and asking for advice, and (d) by helping to support and legitimize organizational policies. These roles entail fact-finding, analysis, interpretation, and other responsibilities. For example, a group of parents may be convened to gather facts on an issue. Or, they may be asked to describe neighborhood traditions and ethnic values to a group of teachers, or to try to explain why a school bond levy was defeated.

2. *The decisionmaker role.* Finally, parents can participate directly in the decisionmaking process through permanent or ad hoc committees and special assignments, and indirectly by choosing to enroll or withdraw their child from the school. For example, parents may serve on a committee to hire the principal or to evaluate the teachers. A group may participate in only one decision or in many. It may be involved at the level of the district or community and/or at the level of specific regions and neighborhoods. And there may be a high percentage of representatives or only a few. On balance, parents can either (a) be in control, (b) be full and equitable partners, or (c) exercise only marginal, circumscribed influence. The fact that charter schools rely on voluntary participation also gives parents another powerful lever that they can use to get their way. Whether it puts them in charge depends on circumstances, such as the numbers on each side of an issue and how badly the school needs the funds for any one child.

## Parent Participation in Charter Schools

In Chapter 2, we observed that when administrators were asked to identify the most distinctive aspects of their schools, the principals of charter schools frequently identified parent involvement. They singled out that feature at least three times more often than did the administrators of comparison schools. Therefore, we wondered how many parents participate in charter schools, how they participate, and what the schools do to promote it. We approached these questions by again comparing the responses of charter school administrators with responses from the administrators of comparison schools that students would have attended had charters not existed. The survey questions did not include measures of parent involvement in educational activities at home.

### *How Many Parents Participate in School Activities?*

School administrators were asked to estimate the approximate number of parents who participate in a variety of ways. The following discussion focuses on events involving at least one fourth of the parents.

#### *Charter Schools Have Relatively High Rates of Parent Involvement*

Seven measures of parent involvement were used: attendance at classes for parents; attending Saturday events; attending evening performances; assisting with fund-raising; helping in the lunch room, offices, or playground; volunteering weekly as a class aide; and helping or teaching in a classroom. On all seven measures, a higher proportion of parents in the charter schools are reported to be participants than parents in the comparison schools[5].

*Consumer roles.* Figure 22 shows that, by a 4 to 1 ratio, there are more charter schools in which at least one fourth of the parents have attended parent classes (14% vs. 3%). Saturday events attract one fourth of the parents in nearly twice as many charter schools (19% vs. 8%). Although smaller, the difference in the number of schools reporting that at least 25% of the parents have attended an evening performances (26% vs. 18%) also favors charter schools.

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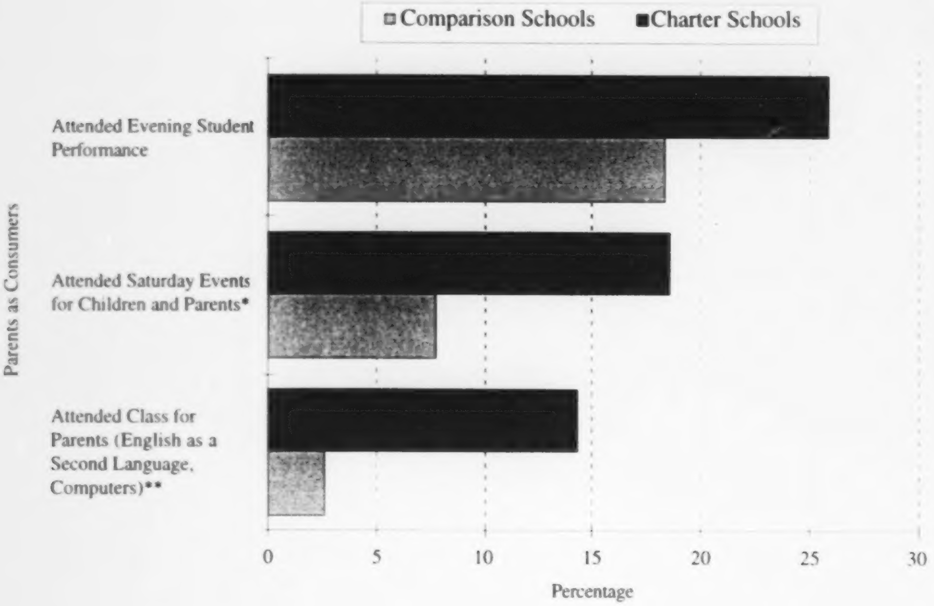
[5] One difference between charter schools and comparison schools might account for the greater levels of parent involvement. The charter schools, being in their first or second year of operation, tend to be smaller than the nearby public schools from which they have drawn most of their students. Some of them, in fact, are *much* smaller, with four charter schools studied having fewer than 100 students. Overall, the median charter school is five sixths the size of the median comparison school. Smaller schools may themselves promote a greater sense of community and greater involvement on the part of the parents. However, in one analysis we eliminated the charter schools with small enrollments (under 100). The differences recalculated between the remaining charter and comparison schools were only slightly smaller.

**Figure 22**
*Percentage of Schools in Which at Least 25% of the Parents Have Participated in Consumer Roles: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*

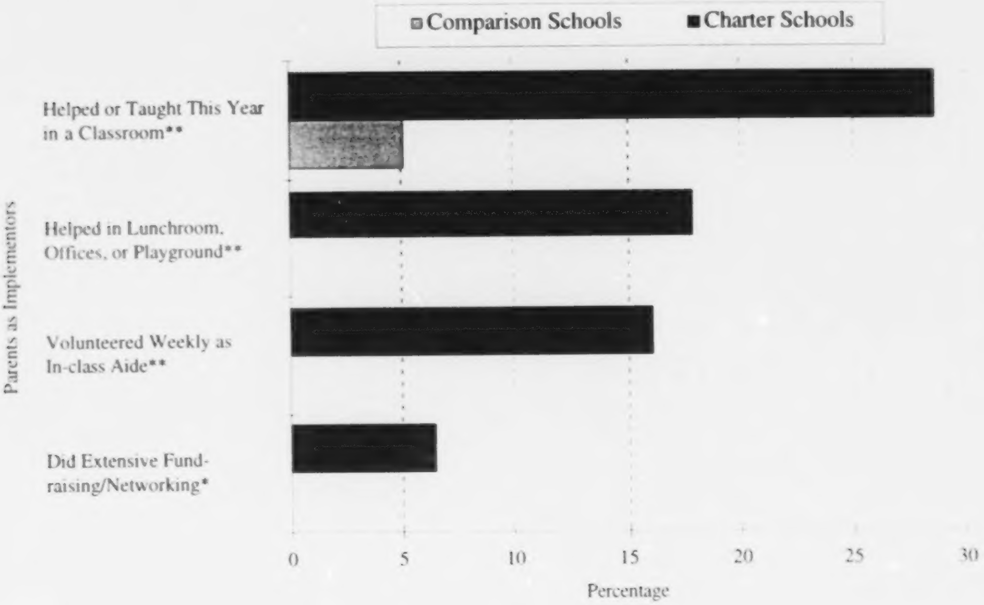


* p < .05   ** p < .01

*Implementor roles.* Figure 23 shows that parents of charter school students are much more likely to have helped or taught in the classroom, or volunteered weekly as a class aide, than parents associated with the comparison schools. Considering only the schools in which at least one fourth of the parents participate in an activity, nearly six times more parents of charter school students have helped or taught in a classroom than parents associated with comparison schools (29% vs. 5%). Also, substantial proportions of charter schools can count on at least one fourth of the parents helping in lunch rooms, offices, or playgrounds (18%), and volunteering as classroom aides (16%). A smaller percentage of schools say that many parents engage in extensive fund-raising or networking activities (7%). In the comparison schools, one fourth of the parents have been involved in only one of these functions—helping/teaching in classrooms.

**Figure 23**

*Percentage of Schools in Which at Least 25% of the Parents have Participated in Implementor Roles: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

*The Absolute Percentage of Parents Involved in Charter Schools Is Low*

Even in charter schools, the vast majority of parents do not participate—particularly when more than just the parent's presence is required. For example, only a small minority of charter schools can count on even one fourth of their parents helping in a classroom, or one tenth doing committee work or fund-raising. However, if each parent chooses to focus on a different area of activity, the level of participation might be higher than reflected in Figure 23.

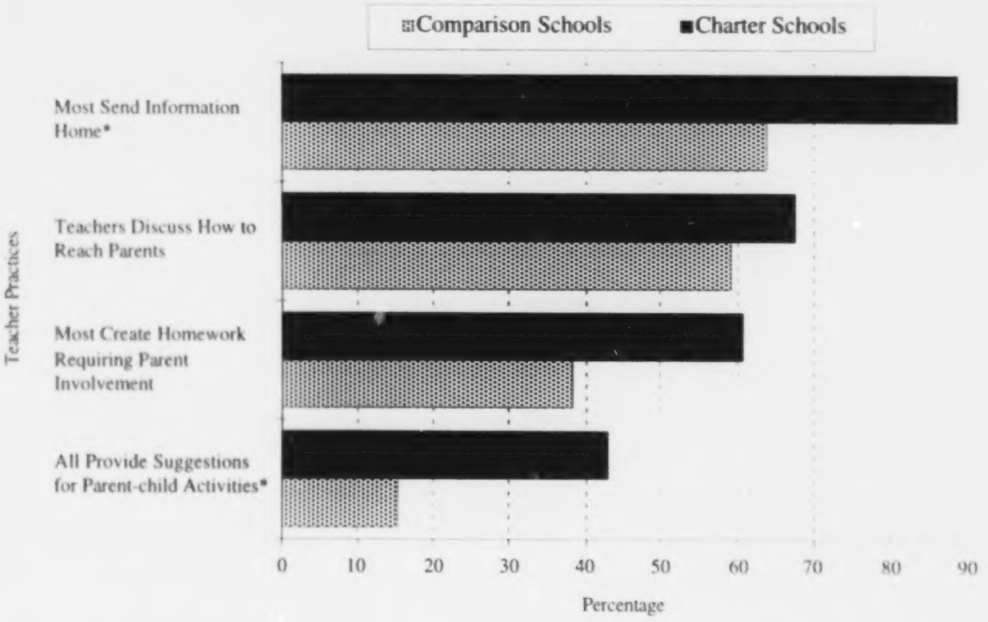
Our conclusion is that charter schools do have higher levels of parent involvement than found in comparable local public schools. Although most parents do not participate in any given activity, different parents could be involved in the various activities, in which case participation rates could be higher than reflected here.

### *What Do Charter Schools Do To Encourage Parent Participation?*

Schools can use a variety of approaches to incorporate parents as participants in the educational process. They range from informational efforts (e.g., teachers sending home descriptions of their unit plans), to making the school a friendly and inviting place for parents to be (e.g., a parent lounge). They also include outreach efforts (e.g., a parent or a professional outreach worker making home visits or rounding up volunteers) and formal statements conveying specific expectations for parents (e.g., parent contracts, creating homework assignments requiring parental assistance). Figures 24 and 25 display responses from the administrators of both types of schools on various measures of school and teacher practice.

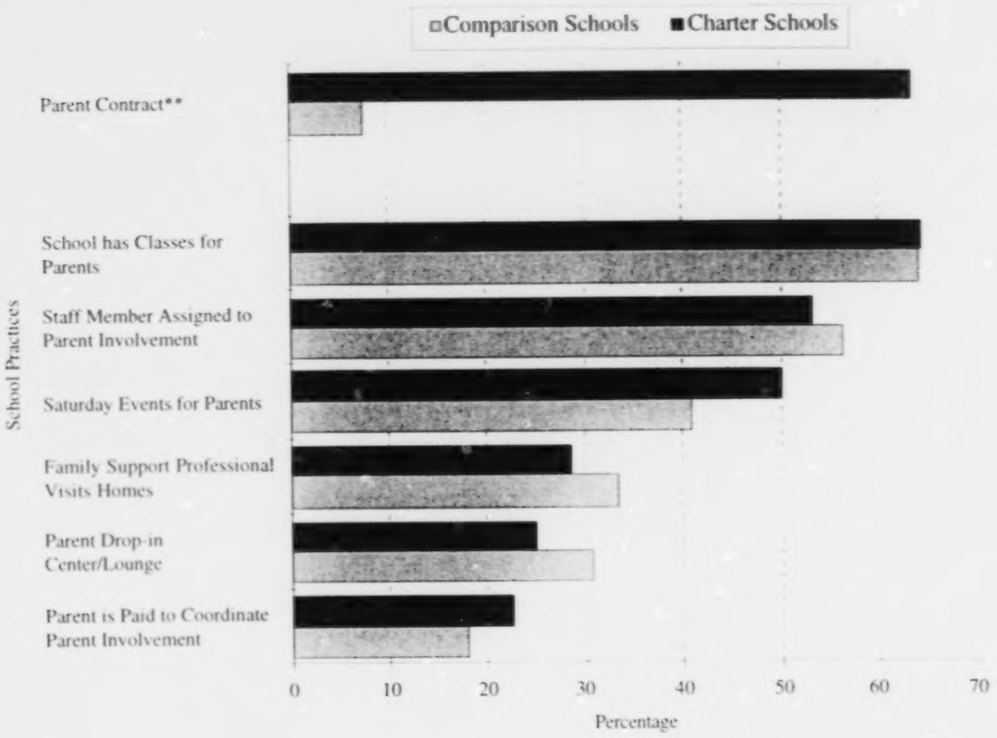
Figure 24 shows teacher-specific practices as reported by the school administrator.

**Figure 24**
*Teacher Practices for Increasing Parent Involvement at Home: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



* p < .05

**Figure 25**
*School Activities To Support Parent Involvement: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



** p < .01

*Charter School Teachers Provide More Suggestions to Parents, and Tend To Use Other Selected Practices for Reaching Parents More Often Than Teachers in Comparison Schools*

Figure 24 demonstrates a pattern of consistent differences between efforts by teachers in these two types of schools to involve parents at home. On each of the four measures, charter school teachers are reported to be more active. The largest difference concerns the practice of providing suggestions for parent-child activities. Three times more charter school administrators estimate that all of their teachers regularly provide suggestions for activities that parents could do at home with their child. Other differences are smaller, but in the same direction: *most teachers create homework assignments requiring parent involvement* (61% vs. 39%); *most teachers send information home* (89% vs. 63%); and *teachers discuss how to reach parents* (68% vs. 59%).

Turning from teacher practices, Figure 25 shows steps administrators can take to increase parent involvement.

*The Only Difference Between Charter Schools and Comparison Schools in Administrative Practices Used To Increase Parent Involvement Is That the Former Use Parent Contracts Much More Frequently*

By a huge margin, charter schools use parent contracts much more often than comparison schools use them (63% vs. 8%). However, there is little difference between the two types of schools on the other measures listed in Figure 25, namely: offering classes for parents, assigning a specialist to promote parent involvement, holding Saturday events for parents, making home visits, providing a parent lounge, and paying a parent to coordinate parent involvement activities.

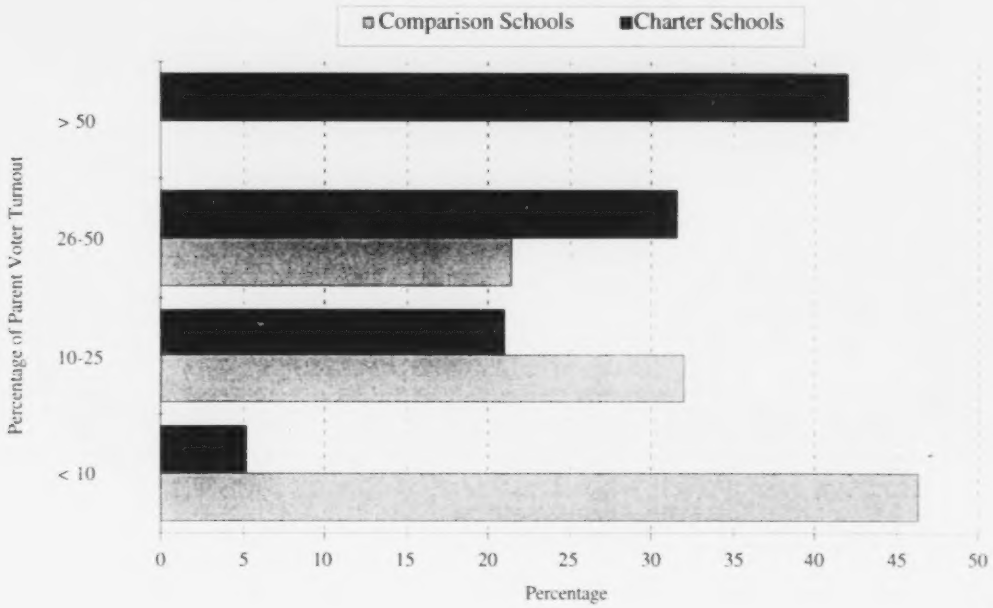
## Parent Influence in Charter Schools

Aside from participating in school activities, we wondered whether parents have more influence on school policies than their counterparts in other nearby public schools.

### *Are Charter School Parents Active Voters?*

One way parents can wield influence is by turning out in large numbers for school elections. We asked administrators to estimate the percentage of eligible parents who voted in the last election for members of the school's governing board. Figure 26 reports the results.

**Figure 26**
*Parent Voting Turnout: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



*Note.* The difference in voter turnout is significant at the .000 level.

*Charter Schools Have Relatively High Voter Turnouts*

More than 40% of the charters report a parent-voter turnout of greater than 50%. No comparison school matches this level of activity. At the other extreme, only 5% of the charters report a turnout below 10%, but that is the norm in nearly one half of the comparisons (46%).

*The Majority of Charter School Parents Do Not Vote*

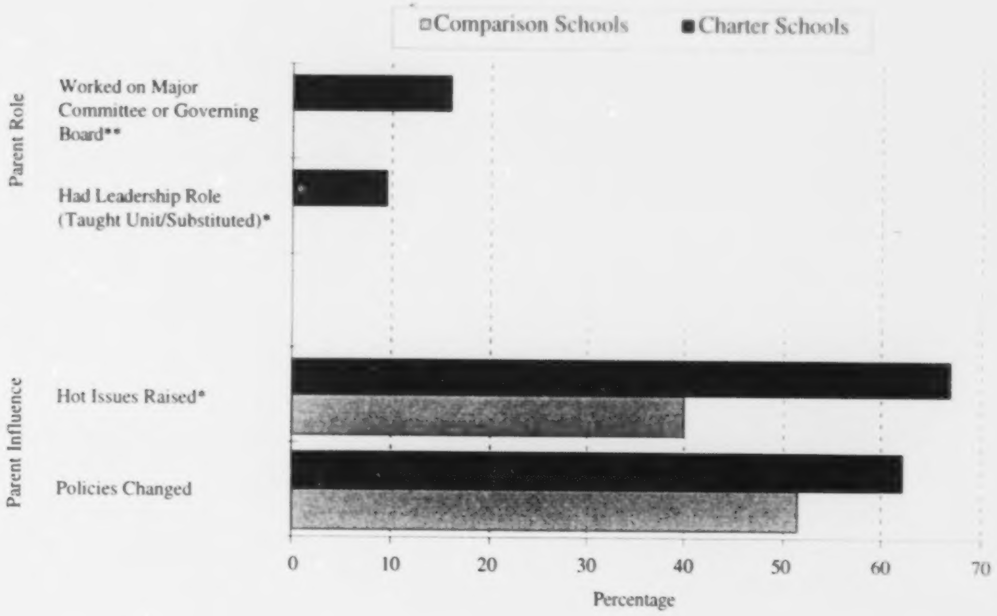
Fifty-five percent of the parents in charter schools did not vote in recent elections (not shown). This pattern indicates that a minority of the parents—albeit a large one—continue to have a disproportionate direct influence on school policies in charter schools. At the same time, as we pointed out, in free choice schools like charters, even parents who do not actively participate have the potential of exerting some indirect influence because they have the power to withdraw their child.

We conclude, then, that parents in charter schools are far more active as voters than their counterparts in comparison schools. Nevertheless, most charter school parents do not vote.

### *Are Parents in Charter Schools Assuming Leadership Positions?*

Figure 27 reports the percentages of schools reporting that at least one fourth of the parents (a) have occupied leadership roles and (b) worked on major committees or governing bodies. This figure also displays two measures of parents' impact: (a) whether parents have been responsible for changing at least one policy or practice; and (b) whether they have raised "hot" issues.

**Figure 27**
*Parent Input and Influence: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



* p < .05  ** p < .01

#### *A Substantial Percentage of Parents in Charter Schools Have Held Leadership Positions*

About 1 in 10 charter school principals estimates that at least one fourth of the parents have held leadership roles, and 16% report that as many have worked on major committees or governing bodies (see Figure 27). No comparison school reports leadership from as many parents.

### *Are Parents in Charter Schools Having an Impact?*

To ascertain whether parents are influencing school governance, administrators were asked to indicate whether (a) at least one policy or practice has changed because of parent influence, and (b) whether a parent (or group of parents) has raised any issues that have been hotly debated or controversial.

*In Most Charter Schools, Parents Have Raised Controversial Issues*

Figure 27 shows that charter school parents have raised such controversial issues more often than their counterparts, by a nearly 2 to 1 margin (68% vs. 40%).

*In Most Charter Schools, Parents Have Been Responsible for Changes in Policies or Practices*

Figure 27 also indicates that in most charter schools, parents have been responsible for change. However, there is only a small (10%) difference between charters and comparisons in this respect.

### *Are Charter School Parents Promoting Nontraditional School Practices?*

Because it seems that charter school parents are directly influencing policies, we wanted to know whether they are using their influence to promote nontraditional school practices. School administrators were asked whether, in general, parents on the governing board are pushing toward traditional ("conservative") or nontraditional ("radical") practices.

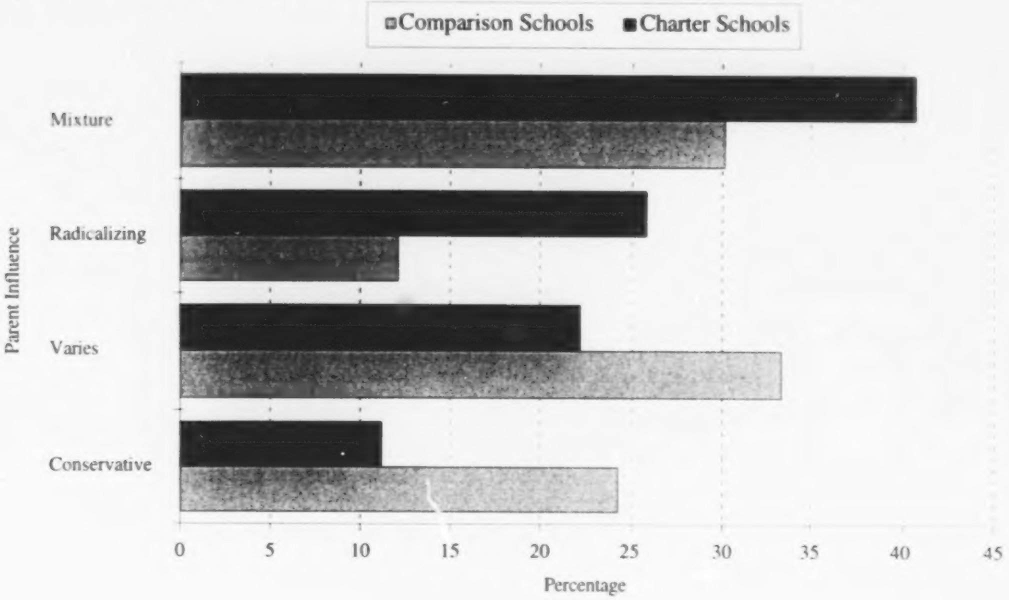
*Charter School Parents Are More Likely To Advocate Nontraditional Than Traditional Approaches*

Figure 28 shows that, by a 2 to 1 margin, parents who advocate nontraditional ("radical") approaches prevail more often in charter schools than in the comparison schools. One fourth of the charter school administrators say that, in general, parents on their governing board push for nontraditional approaches, compared to 12% of the comparison school administrators. Correspondingly, by about the same margin, comparison school administrators say their parents more often push for traditional approaches (24% vs. 11%).

*In Most Schools, Parents Fluctuate Between Nontraditional and Traditional Approaches*

However, there is no basis for labeling most charter school parents as radical influences. In the majority of both types of schools, there is no consistent direction of influence.

**Figure 28**
*Role of Parents on Governing Board: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



## Summary and Discussion

Charter schools have high rates of parent involvement relative to comparison schools. More parents in charter schools participate in seven different types of activities measured. In particular, by a 2 to 1 margin, charter schools more frequently attract at least one fourth of the parents to Saturday events. By a margin of 6 to 1, they are much more likely to have helped or taught in the classroom or volunteered weekly as a class aide. A substantial number of charter schools can count on at least one fourth of the parents helping in lunch rooms, offices, or playgrounds, and volunteering as classroom aides.

However, when the *absolute* percentage of parents involved is considered, even in charter schools, relatively few parents participate. For example, only a small minority of charter schools can count on even one fourth of their parents helping in a classroom, or one tenth doing committee work or fund-raising. However, this does not rule out the possibility that different individuals participate in each type of activity, in which case the actual level of participation may be higher than reported. In any event, even if most parents do not participate in any given activity, it seems clear that charter schools have higher levels of parent involvement than found in comparable local public schools.

Teachers in charter schools encourage parent involvement in several ways, such as creating homework requiring parent involvement and sending information home. But the biggest difference is in the percentage of teachers who provide suggestions to parents for parent-child activities. Three times more charter school administrators estimate that their teachers regularly provide suggestions for activities that parents could do at home with their child.

On the other hand, we found only one difference between charter schools and comparison schools in administrative approaches to increasing parent involvement. By a huge margin, charter schools use parent contracts much more frequently. It appears that, in lieu of engaging in other types of outreach approaches, charter schools have chosen to rely heavily on contracts as the means of gaining additional parent involvement at school. Most of these contracts are oriented toward school-site involvement by parents. Seventeen of the 23 contracts we analyzed have school participation requirements; only 5 have home-participation requirements. The median time requirement specified for both home and school participation is 30 hours per year. Because of the importance of this mechanism, Chapter 6 is devoted to parent contracts.

Not only do charter school parents participate at higher rates than their counterparts in other nearby schools; they also are more likely to have held leadership positions, worked on major committees or boards, and they are far more likely to have voted for board members. Even though most charter school parents do not vote, it is important to remember that all parents of students in a charter school at least have the right to withdraw their child, which probably gives them leverage.

Although parents have been responsible for changes in policies and practices in most charter schools, so have parents in comparison schools. But while there is little difference in this regard, there is a difference in the rate at which parents have raised controversial issues. In most charter schools, parents have raised controversial issues much more often than parents in comparison schools. Charter school parents also are more likely to advocate nontraditional approaches than parents in the other schools, who tend to take more conservative positions. However, because the picture is mixed in most schools, there is no basis for labeling charter school parents as radical influences.

# CHAPTER 6: PARENT CONTRACTS
# Do They Exclude Students?[6]

*Kathryn Nakagawa and Ronald G. Corwin*

In the preceding chapter, we documented the growing trend toward including parents as integral parts of educational programs and the frequency with which charter schools are using parent contracts to promote their involvement.

## Characteristics of Parent Contracts

When parents sign this type of contract, they agree to devote a certain amount time participating in specific ways. For example, one charter school requires parents to volunteer a minimum of three hours per month at the school. Another states in its charter that:

> 1. Parents, by signing their child's registration form, commit themselves to at least two hours of school service per month. Any student accepted on an above mentioned agreement will meet a prescribed written contract and will understand, if the contract is broken, said agreement will be revoked and the student will be disenrolled.

### *Advantages and Disadvantages of Parent Contracts*

In view of their growing popularity, it will be useful to review some possible advantages and disadvantages of parent contracts.

*Contracts Provide Guidance to Parents Who Want To Be Involved But Are Unsure About How To Go About It or What Will Be Helpful to the School*

Contracts make clear to parents how they can contribute to the school and to their child's education. At the same time, as explicit agreements that parents enter into voluntarily, contracts at least protect parents from some more arbitrary forms of treatment, such as Wisconsin's Learnfare program. This program withholds a portion of welfare payments to families whose teenage children miss more than two days of school a month. Another is South Carolina's Schoolhouse Safety Alliance Act of 1994, which provides that parents deemed by school officials to be lacking in parenting skills must attend parenting classes.

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[6] Parts of this chapter have been adapted from Becker, H. J., Nakagawa, K., & Corwin, R. G. (1995, April). *Parent involvement contracts in California's charter schools* (occasional paper). Los Alamitos, CA: Southwest Regional Laboratory.

### *Contracts Can Be Used To Formally or Informally Exclude Some Families*

However, contracts also may discourage some parents from enrolling their child if they are unable to meet the requirements, or feel uncomfortable with their assignments or the sanctions for failing to meet the obligations. Therefore, we wondered whether parent contracts sometimes rule out children whose parents cannot make, or refuse to make, the necessary commitments. This possibility has been suggested by Cobb (1992), who argued that although Catholic schools may not select students on the basis of income or academic ability, they are selective in requiring a sincere interest (by parents) in academic work. Selection on this basis could, in turn, account for the superior achievement levels found in Catholic schools (see also Witte, 1990).

Some qualitative sociological research has shown that educators tend to structure the opportunities for parent involvement in ways that favor parents who have the time to participate and who have been most supportive of what the schools already were doing (Van Galen, 1987). One author concludes that under a deregulated school choice plan, "a school can become the private preserve of narrow, parochial constituencies, who are less concerned with general improvement than with promoting their own interests" (Elmore, 1993). (See Corwin, 1993, for a review of some of this literature.)

### *The Parents of Students at Risk Could Be Especially Vulnerable to This Form of Selectivity*

With respect to social class differences, Lareau (1989) has found that middle-class parents are better able to meet school and teacher expectations for parent involvement than working-class parents. Expectations also are related to ethnic and racial background. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) suggests that Latino parents, for instance, are not accustomed to some types of participation that are typically expected. Muller and Kerbow (1993) have found that African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and White parents differ in the kinds of activities in which they are involved, and they also differ in the contexts for those activities. Asian American parents were little involved in the school contexts, but more involved in the home context, particularly in terms of setting restrictions for their children. In contrast, White parents were involved in the school context; the home context was social, that is, talking with children about their school experiences.

## ***Provisions of Selected Parent Contracts***

Contracts are formal expressions of "the law of voluntary exchange" (Chirelstein, 1990, p. 8), which are created to specify the actions each party agrees to in entering into an exchange. Contracts ensure that each party understands the expectations of the other and provide assurance that the agreement will be honored (Chirelstein, 1990, p. 1). One means of providing assurance is to spell out the consequences when a party fails to fulfill the contract. To obtain more information about such provisions, contracts from 23 charter schools were analyzed.

*Contracts Set Forth Explicit Expectations Parents Agree To Follow*

Most of them begin with opening clauses detailing the general reasons for using the formal contract mechanism. For example:

> 1. It is the belief of this school that the education the children will be receiving continues into the home and is supported by the home environment. For this reason a child's enrollment in the school must be supported by the parents' understanding of the educational philosophy and goals of the school. (contract I, p. 1)

Opening statements are followed by the specific provisions that parents are asked to follow. The provisions are generally written to make explicit the expectations of the school. The contracts typically end with a statement of promise, *I agree to the above...,* and contain space for a parent signature.

Some charter schools include statements that underscore their right to refuse to admit any student whose parents do not fulfill the contract terms. For example, one contract requires parents to sign this statement:

> 1. I understand that if any of the above conditions are not adhered to, my child may be expelled. (contract Q)

Another contract requires parents to agree that:

> 1. I will participate in monthly meetings. If I am unable to attend, I will work four hours of additional service or pay a fine of $20 for each such meeting. I am aware that I cannot miss more than three meetings.... If I do not meet this requirement I understand that my daughter/son will not be able to continue attending this school. (contract D)

*Contracts Usually Do Not Specify the School's Obligations*

As mentioned, most of the 23 contracts do not specify what is being promised by the school. Contracts rarely require a signature of a school representative, and when a signature is called for, it is rarely preceded by a promise or oath of the kind parents signed. Typically, school representatives sign as witnesses or as approving parties to verify that the parent has agreed to and signed the document.

The implicit (and sometimes explicit) "barter" is the child's education in return for greater parent involvement. The "failure-to-comply" clauses are intended to make this most clear, as the following statement shows:

> 1. I understand that the school relies on parents to volunteer their time and if I fail to fulfill my volunteer hours, my child could be removed. (contract K, p. 2)

The parent's obligations tend to be specifically stated. They are asked to agree to the following kinds of provisions:

- general support of school goals and practices, that is:

  1. [I] agree to adhere to all the principles of the charter school philosophy. (contract F, p. 2)
  2. [I will] support and reinforce the school's conduct code with my children. (contract O, p. 2)

- home/parenting practices and philosophy, that is:

  1. [I agree to] help our children develop feelings of self-worth and a positive attitude toward school by providing love and emotional support at home. (contract B, p. 1)
  2. The parents/guardians will assure that students come to school rested, clean, well fed, and appropriately dressed. (contract J, p. 2)
  3. Children will be asked to come to school dressed neatly in clothes without cartoon or media images and with footwear appropriate for the season. (contract I, p. 2)

- homework assistance, that is:

  1. [I will] assist my child with homework and review schoolwork with them, which includes reading to and with them a minimum of four times each week. (contract U)
  2. [I agree to] supervise and assist in the completion of homework, providing a suitable place and schedule for its completion. (contract O, p. 1)

- school-related parent involvement, that is:

  1. Parents are expected to volunteer in the school. This could mean assisting in classrooms, driving on field trips, collecting book orders, working on committees, developing parent education classes.... (contract C, p. 1)

  2. The parents/guardians...are required to serve a minimum six-month term on the advisory council [and]...are required to attend quarterly school meetings. (contract K, p. 1)

- student attendance, that is:

  1. Tardiness and absenteeism are poor habits to develop. Not only are vital educational experiences lost, but also [they] reduced the [school] budget by $94,000. (contract V, p. 1)

## *The Failure-to-Comply Clause*

According to the California statute, students are not required to attend any charter school. Therefore they can ultimately protect their rights, as defined by the charter, by disenrolling. However, if they chose to be in the school, they are subject to the terms of the contract, if the school chooses to enforce them.

### *The Failure-to-Comply Clause Seldom Applies to Schools*

About one half of the 23 contracts we analyzed contain a failure-to-comply clause applying to the parent or the student, but not to the school. The obligations of the school or the staff, beyond those contained in the charter, are specifically described in only one in three contracts. The eight with such provisions specify three forms of obligations:

- Intentions to comply with a general philosophy, that is:

  1. As a staff member, I agree to: Promote a positive school climate. Be a good role model, show respect for all, provide a safe and orderly environment, implement school rules fairly for all. (contract B, p. 2)

- Obligations intended to help parents fulfill their responsibilities, that is:

  1. The teachers/school community will provide a list of materials needed at home in order to complete homework or the charter school will document problem behaviors in order to report accurately to parents. (contract E)

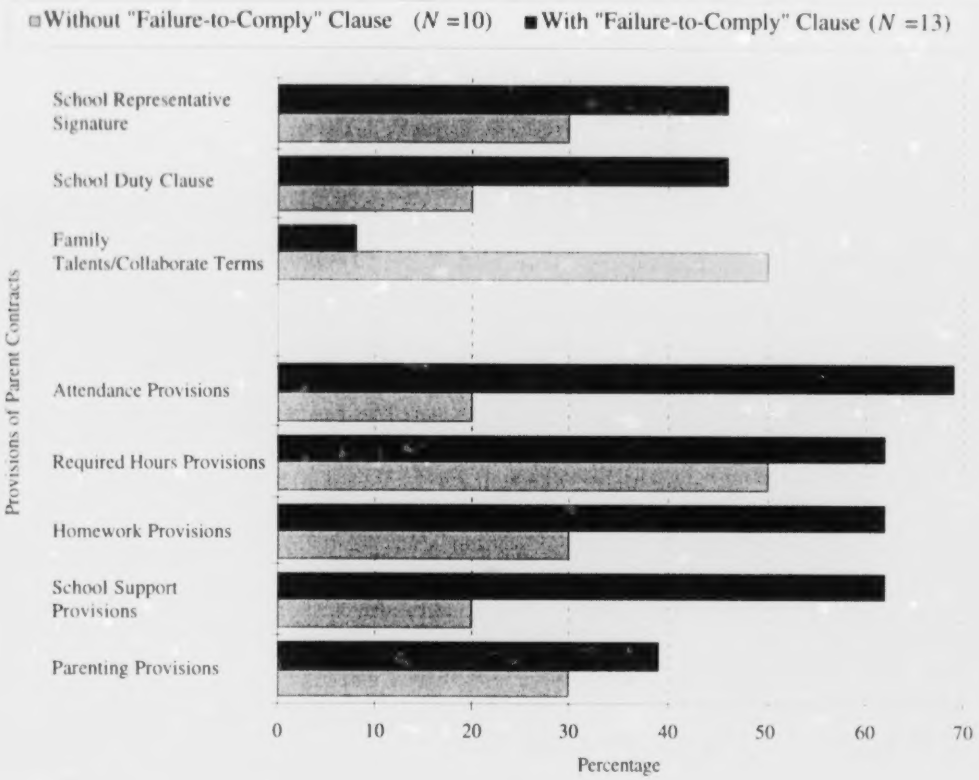
- Specific responsibilities generally provided by schools, that is:

  1. Provide supervision for crosswalks and corners (First Street/Second Street/Third Street) (contract E) or complete written assessments on progress reports concerning student's [work] (eight progress reports per year). (contract S, p. 3)

*Contracts With a Failure-to-Comply Clause Frequently Specify Parent Obligations*

The presence or absence of the failure-to-comply clauses suggests that some contracts are more restrictive than others and could result in potentially graver consequences for parents who fail to meet the provisions. Figure 29 shows that contracts with the failure-to-comply clause also more frequently include several types of parent responsibilities. In particular, three times as many contracts with the failure-to-comply clause require parents to support school codes and rules at home (62% vs. 20%), and specify that a child's attendance is required (69% vs. 20%). More than twice as many require parents to support homework assignments (62% vs. 30%). In addition, provisions describing parenting responsibilities and required hours, although included in many of the contracts without the failure-to-comply clause as well, are included in a few more contracts with the failure-to-comply clause. Parents could find it more difficult to fulfill the more restrictive contracts because more is required of these parents.

**Figure 29**
*Parent Provisions in Contracts With and Without Failure-to-Comply Clause*



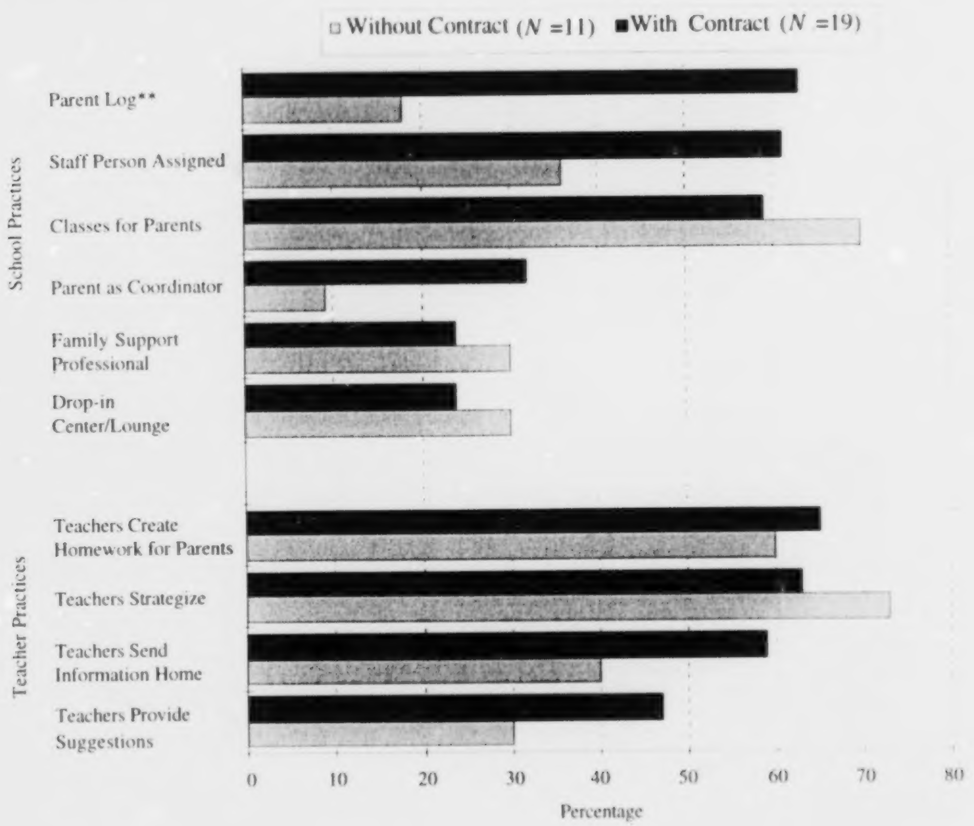
### *Schools With More Restrictive Contracts Also Acknowledge Their Own Responsibilities*

Figure 29 lists other contract provisions. The contracts with failure-to-comply clauses more often include school duty clauses (46% vs. 20%) and signatures by a school official (46% vs. 30%). In addition, terms that promote a sense of *partnership*, such as understanding *family talents* and *collaboration*, are used in one half of the contracts that did not use the failure-to-comply clause, compared to just 8% of the other contracts.

### *Schools That Use Contracts Encourage Parent Involvement in Other Ways*

However, although schools using contracts might require more of parents, they also provide extra support to aid parents in meeting the school expectations for involvement. Figure 30 shows that contract schools more frequently assign staff to focus on involvement, pay a parent to coordinate involvement activities, and use a parent log. They also tend to have more teachers who send information home explaining lessons and who provide suggestions about activities that parents and children can do at home. However, another analysis (not shown) suggests that the same cannot be said of schools that use the failure-to-comply clause; they do not use other strategies more often than schools that do not have this clause in their contracts.

**Figure 30**
*School and Teacher Practices To Improve Parent Involvement in Charter Schools That Use And Do Not Use Parent Contracts*



** p < .01

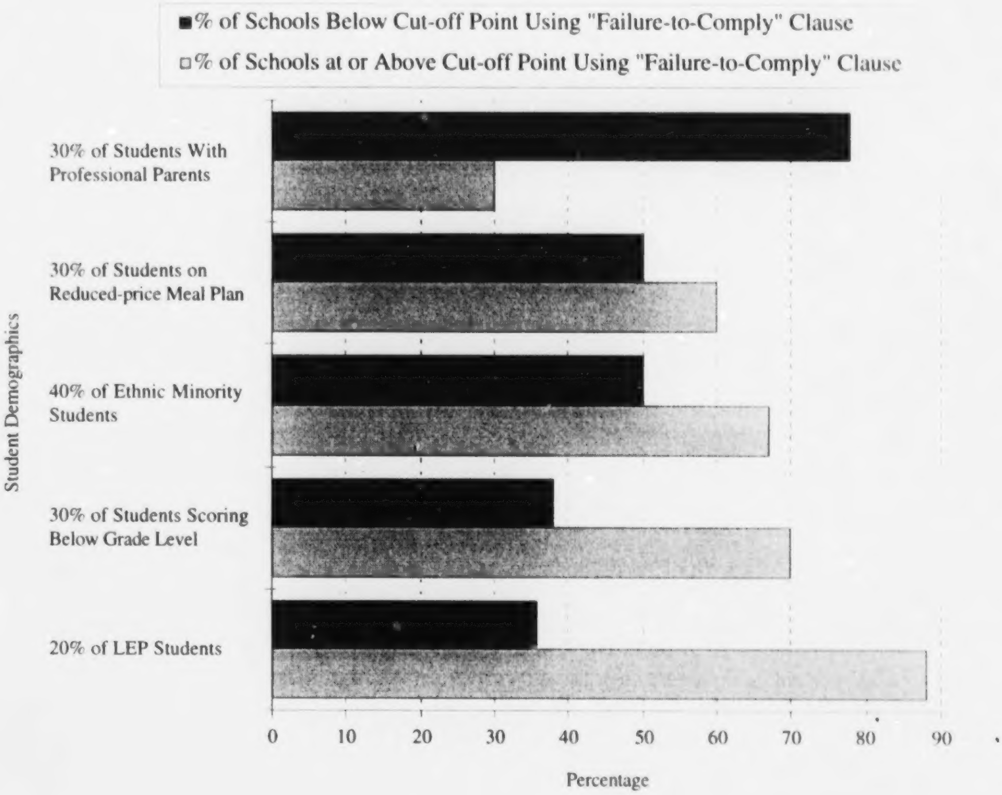
## Parent Involvement and Student Selectivity

In view of the priority that many schools are giving to parent involvement, we wondered whether schools will give preference to admitting students whose parents are most likely to comply with the participation requirements. To obtain more information about this possibility, we (a) compared characteristics of students in schools that use the failure-to-comply clause with students in other schools; and (b) analyzed student admission practices.

### *Is the Failure-to-Comply Clause Being Applied to At-Risk Students?*

First, we wondered whether the restrictive contracts that include this clause are being used disproportionately in schools that enroll high percentages of populations that traditionally have been underserved. Figure 31 suggests this could be the case.

**Figure 31**
*Selected Populations Served by Charter Schools Using Parent Contracts That Do Not Include a Failure-to-Comply Clause*



### *Restrictive Contracts That Include the Failure-to-Comply Clause Are Being Used Disproportionately by Schools Enrolling Some Types of At-Risk Students*

Of the 23 contracts analyzed, this clause is far more frequently used by schools with larger percentages of below-average students and students classified as LEP, as well as in those without a substantial core of students from professional families. However, it is used only slightly more often in schools with larger proportions of low-income students and minorities.

Probably, this sanction is not applied frequently, but the pattern suggests that some at-risk families could be more directly affected by the consequences of noncompliance than other families, while students from professional families seem to be less subject to it. To the extent that this clause deters some parents from applying for admission on behalf of their child, LEP students and those who score below average on tests also are more likely to be excluded.

## ***Is Parent Participation Being Used as a Criterion for Selecting Students?***

To obtain more information about student admission practices, we explored three types of practices involving: subtle negotiations associated with the admissions process; student selection criteria; and parent participation requirements.

### *Some Parents Who Do Not Meet the School's Participation Requirements Voluntarily Chose Not To Apply or To Withdraw Their Child*

Charter school administrators were asked about student admission and withdrawal events related to parent involvement. They were asked how often any of the following events had happened since their school began enrolling students:

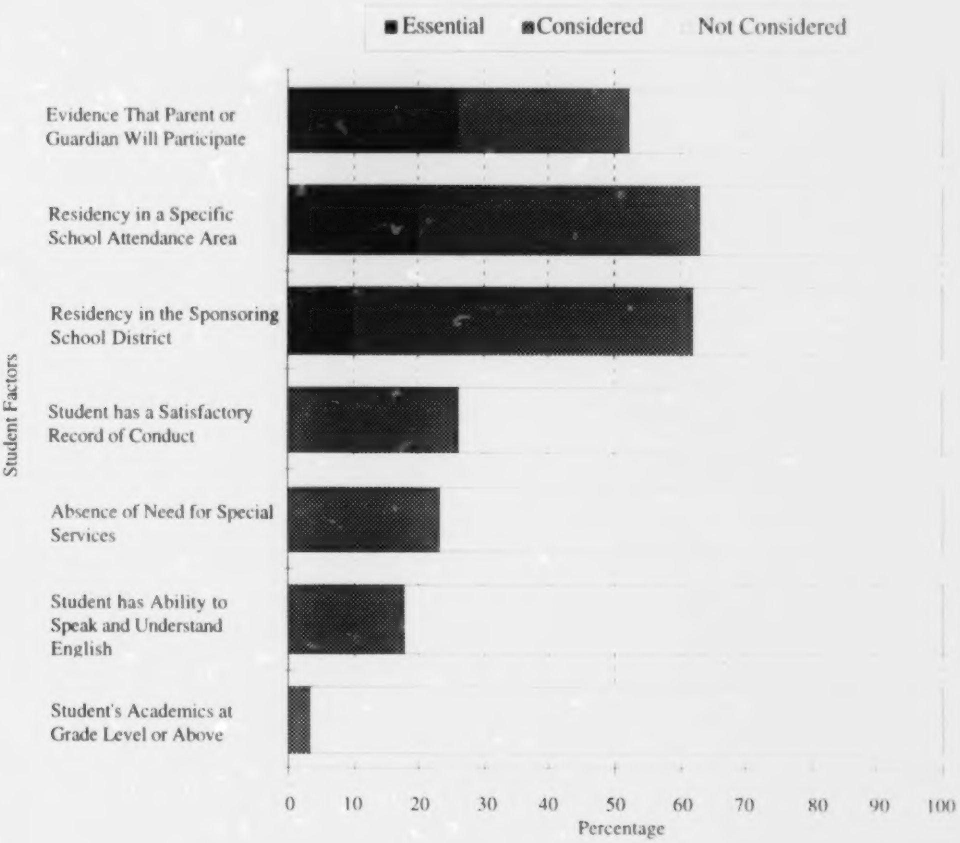
- a family being informally advised not to apply because it was felt that problems would inevitably arise over parent involvement expectations;
- a family not completing admissions because they did not agree with the school's expectations for parent involvement;
- a parent voluntarily taking his or her child from the school because he or she did not want to fulfill expected commitments of parent involvement; and
- a student being asked to transfer out because the parent was not willing to commit him or herself to the level of involvement expected.

Twenty of the 23 charter schools with parent contracts also returned a completed administrator survey. About one half (9) acknowledged that one or more of these events had occurred at least once, and usually not more than twice. Only one school said that any of these occurred more than five times. Voluntary parent withdrawal was the most common occurrence; expulsion occurred least often (once each of two schools with contracts).

*Parent Participation Is Frequently Used as a Selection Criterion*

A conventional public school must accept every student within its attendance area, except for students needing particular special services, such as severely handicapped individuals. Charter schools, on the other hand, can select their students. About one in two charter school administrators (48%) report parent participation is *not considered* in admissions decisions. However, one in four state that an *essential* attribute is that the parent or guardian *will participate in requested ways* (see Figure 32). The others indicated it is *considered but not essential*.

**Figure 32**
*Importance of Selected Factors in Admitting Students to Charter Schools*



Respondents also were asked about other possible factors influencing their admissions decisions, such as location of residence (in the district or in a specific attendance area), prior academic performance, having a satisfactory record of conduct, being able to speak English, or not needing special services. No other factor in addition to parent participation and location of residence was said to be essential by any charter school administrator (see Figure 32).

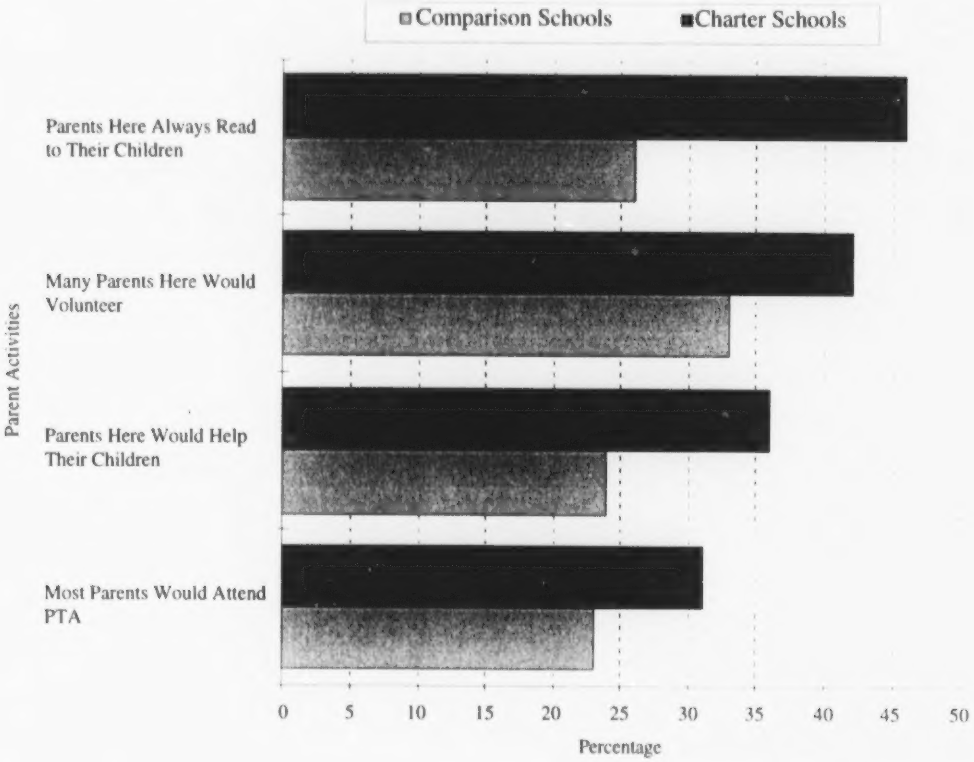
### *Charter Schools Tend To Select Students Whose Parents Are More Involved in the Education Of Their Children*

In addition to measuring selectivity by examining admission events or intentions, one can look at the results. If charter schools do not resemble the public schools from which they draw their students, it provides a basis for inferring that some kind of voluntary selectivity may be occurring. We asked charter school administrators, as well as those in comparison schools, to compare the parents at their school with parents they have encountered in previous work as educators in terms of whether:

1. Most parents here have always read to their children, probably even before their children were old enough to attend school.
2. Parents here would help their children on school-related work even if teachers didn't encourage them.
3. Many parents here would volunteer to spend time helping out at school even if the school didn't require or encourage it.
4. Most parents here would attend PTA meetings and come to parents' nights even if the school didn't encourage it.

On all four characteristics, more charter school administrators estimate that the statement was *more true of their parents than parents at other schools* than administrators of the comparison schools (see Figure 33). The differences are quite small—between 8% and 20%—but the pattern is consistent. It is, of course, possible that parents changed because of the charter school program, or that school administrators overestimate the characteristics of parents who have chosen their school. However, the possibility that some selective recruitment is taking place is at least consistent with patterns already discussed.

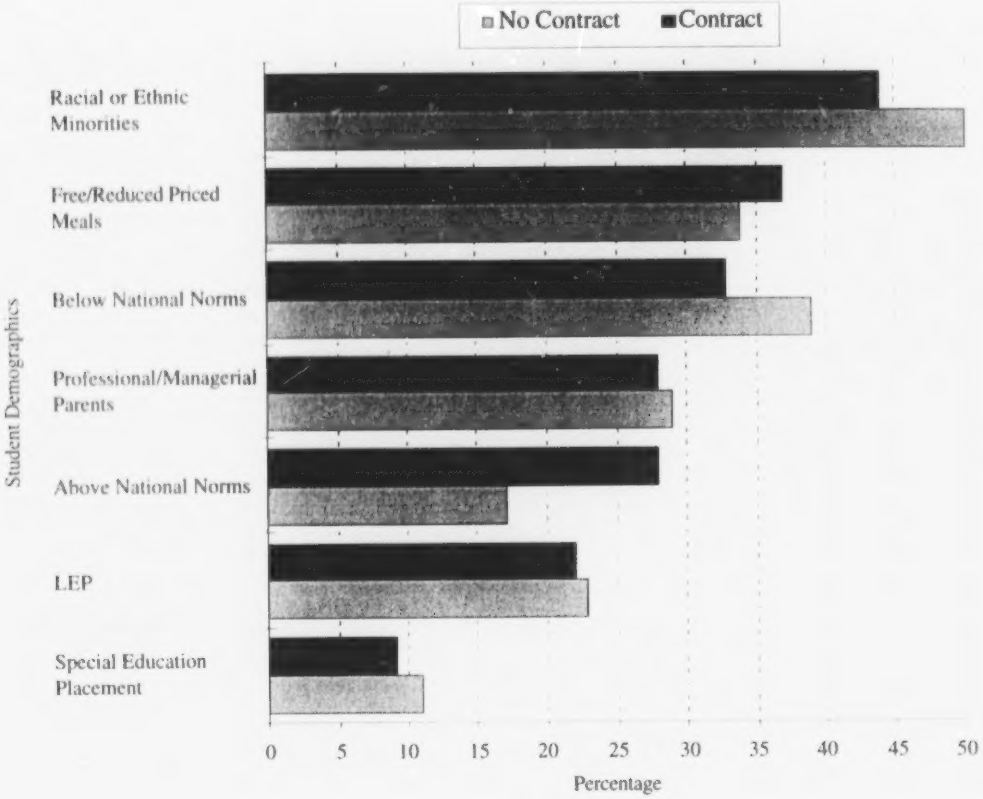
**Figure 33**
*Administrators' Perceptions of Parent Participation: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



### *There Is Little Difference in the Student Characteristics of Schools That Do and Do Not Use Contracts*

Notwithstanding the selection process described, it is important to recognize that schools using contracts are no less likely to serve students who are at risk than schools that do not. Figure 34 reports student social background profiles of schools that do and do not use contracts. It shows that the two categories of schools recruit students who have at-risk characteristics at virtually the same rate. Contract schools have a few more students who are above national norms on standardized tests, but the difference is relatively small (28% vs. 17%).

**Figure 34**
*Selected Populations Served by Charter Schools That Do and Do Not Use Parent Contracts*



## Summary and Discussion

Many of California's charter schools are experimenting with new mechanisms to include parents in their instructional programs. A parent contract is such a mechanism. However, while it can be regarded as an overt expression of a school's commitment to the principle of including parents, a contract also can be used as a device for excluding those students whose parents are unable or unwilling to comply with terms largely prescribed by the school. And, if they do agree to the terms, conceivably, the contract could be used as a lever for controlling how they do and do not participate—although we emphasize that we do not have data pertaining to how frequently the contracts are actually enforced. In any case, the legalistic language characteristically used in contracts seldom conveys a sense of equitable family-school collaboration or recognizes the unique situations or talents of different families.

There is no reason to believe that contracts are being used to deliberately exclude at-risk students, but it is notable that the more restrictive contracts, which explicitly assign burdensome duties to parents, are less likely to be used in schools with a solid core of professional families and more likely to be used where there are lower levels of achievement and more English learners. While perhaps these families stand to benefit the most, they also are probably the ones who are least able to assume the new demands. It appears that the schools have chosen to use binding contracts with precisely the families that could benefit most from a more flexible family-school partnership.

Schools that use contracts also encourage parent involvement in other ways. However, the higher levels of parent involvement in charter schools also can be attributed to their preference for admitting only families who are inclined to participate, while selecting out those who are not. Of course, selectivity is the foundation of the public-schools-of-choice philosophy. Various publics with different values and priorities for schooling should be able to identify and select schools that provide the kind of education they desire, in particular, for their children. Contracts might be regarded as just another alternative admissions standard if it were not for the fact that a very large proportion of California's charter schools serving elementary- and middle-grade students have chosen to require parent contracts. Given their prevalence, it seems likely that at least some students will be excluded based solely on their misfortune of having parents who either cannot, or will not, conform to contractual obligations dictated largely by the schools.

The overall tenor of the parent contracts used by charter schools suggests that they are being used to obtain compliance rather than as a positive incentive to encourage voluntary commitment. They tend to treat the parent as an individual consumer in an asymmetric relationship rather than as an equal partner (Coleman, 1982). As individual consumers, parents can be at a disadvantage in bargaining with formal organizations. In the case of charter schools, of course, they can choose not to apply or to disenroll their child. But if they want the child in the school, they must agree to contract provisions over which they have little say, while the school may terminate the contract if the parent violates its conditions. Contracts do seem to increase parent involvement, but they also increase the school's leverage over parents.

There is ample evidence that conventional public schools are stratified along economic, social, and racial-ethnic criteria reflecting residential patterns. Charter schools, because of their ability to set their own admissions standards, potentially have the power to circumvent these powerful forces by making themselves amenable to families who traditionally have been underserved. Instead, many have chosen to impose burdensome requirements that such families could find difficult to manage. Although charter schools were created to allow parents greater choice in the kinds of schools their children attend, the reverse has happened. Contracts seem to give schools greater choice over the kinds of parents they choose to serve. The traditionally underserved families are the ones most likely to be excluded because they are not necessarily part of a strong tradition of volunteerism, and they frequently have little free time. Such families often consist of single parents or transient adults who also may be English language learners. In a perfect world, none of this would matter because the parents who are excluded from a given charter school could simply turn to another alternative. However, there is no provision anywhere to ensure there will be charter schools for all families. What about the children for whom there are no viable alternatives beyond the conventional school system?

Parent contracts are not inherently selective. They need not be used in ways that discourage or exclude children whose parents do not conform to the school's idea of a viable school-home partnership. They need not be drawn up to be mechanisms for social control. Instead, they can be used to reinforce an equitable and constructive partnership between parents and schools that promotes the children's academic and social growth. First, however, educators, parents, and policymakers need to re-examine the approaches being taken to parent involvement because they ultimately determine which citizens will be served, and who will be excluded from publicly financed programs.

# CHAPTER 7: STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS
## Are Charter Schools Elitist?

*Ronald G. Corwin and John Flaherty*

The charter school concept has been hailed as the "most powerful and promising to emerge from the school reform movement of the past decade" (Sauter, p. 3). But, promising for whom? In the preceding chapter, we reported that many of California's charter schools are using parent contracts to encourage families to participate in their instructional programs and concluded that, perhaps often unintentionally, contracts sometimes act as devices for excluding students whose parents cannot or will not conform to the school's standards of participation. Although charter schools were created to allow parents greater choice in the kinds of schools their children attend, parent contracts seem to give schools greater choice over the kinds of parents they choose to serve. However, parent contracts represent only a small aspect of the broader issue of elitism that often is raised in connection with free market education programs.

In this chapter we shall explore in more detail the question, are charter schools in California available to all types of students? More specifically, will low-income parents and cultural and language minorities—who tend to have fewer resources in the form of information, time, opportunity to commute, power, and money—have equal access to charter schools? And, are charter schools serving students who are doing poorly in school?

These questions directly address the historical sorting and selection function of schools (Warner, Havighurst, & Loeb, 1948). Schools of all types have occasion to select and screen out particular types of students through policies and practices governing admissions, course assignments, grading, and discipline. However, market-driven schools with open admissions policies, and unburdened by many of the conventional rules, have unprecedented opportunities to select preferred types of students. Therefore, it is particularly appropriate to examine whether at-risk, underserved students have equitable access to charter schools.

## Background

Some writers maintain that choice programs tend to target students from the most advantaged families and eschew those who are educationally disadvantaged. For example, Wells and Crain (1992) predict that granting parents the option to choose schools will lead to more racial, ethnic, and economic segregation and stratification. When the selection process is biased in this direction, it is sometimes referred to as "creaming" or "skimming." Schools that cream or skim have been labeled "elitist" (Elmore, 1986; Lee & Croninger, 1994; Wells, 1993a; Witte, 1990).

## *What Is Elitism?*

Elitism is a complex notion that, in practice, is difficult to measure. Before elitism can be demonstrated, the following questions must be answered.

### *Which Group of Students Is Being Admitted or Excluded?*

There are two forms of elitism. On the one hand, a school can admit only students from economically and socially privileged families. On the other hand, it can exclude the least privileged groups. One form of elitism does not necessarily imply the other. For example, a school might not enroll high concentrations of low-income minorities, but it does not follow that it is targeting only privileged students.

We will use the terms *creaming* and *skimming* in this discussion to distinguish between these two practices. We define *creaming* as a prevailing tendency for a school to *select in* (recruit/admit) students who are least at risk, in particular above average White students from relatively privileged families. *Skimming* is the term we use when there is a prevailing tendency for a school to *select out* (avoid/reject) students who are most at risk—in particular, racial/ethnic or language minorities from low-income families who are potential dropouts or are failing school, or who qualify for special education. We will use the term *elitism* to encompass both creaming and skimming.

### *Will an Absolute or Comparative Standard Be Used To Gauge Elitism?*

The degree of elitism within a school can be measured by either an absolute or comparative standard. The *absolute* method is based on an established level of homogeneity within the student body. This homogeneity can occur at either end of the distribution of student characteristics. For example, a school might enroll only privileged students, or it could enroll only students who are not disadvantaged. The criterion for homogeneity can be set as a simple majority of the student body, or it could be set higher (e.g., 70%, 90%).

The *comparative* standard focuses on how closely the *distribution* of students within a given school corresponds to the distribution within one or more comparison schools. Using this approach, one could determine, for example, whether there are disproportionately more privileged students in a given school than in other nearby schools, irrespective of the homogeneity criterion.

### *How Many Instances of Creaming or Skimming Are Needed To Qualify a School as Elitist?*

Schools can select on a variety of student characteristics—race, ethnicity, income, academic performance, and the like. The proportion of students with these different characteristics can vary within a school. For example, a school that has few racial minorities could have a preponderance of students who are below average academically, or who have been retained in grade one or more times. It is underserving one type of at-risk student, but compensating by serving other types. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account directional *patterns* among the full set of characteristics of interest.

### *How Many Schools Are Elitist?*

Assuming that some elitist schools have been identified by one or more of the forgoing methods, it is then necessary to decide the proportion of charter schools that must qualify as elitist before one can say the entire set of schools is elitist. For example, if one in four charter schools has elitist characteristics, does it follow that "charter schools are elitist"? Or, should there be a majority of schools before charter schools are labeled elitist? Or, should there be a vast majority?

### *How Much Choice Do Schools Actually Have Within the Available Applicant Pool?*

Finally, elitism can be a product of deliberate choice on the part of a school, or, depending on the pool of available applicants, it can be an inadvertent product of circumstance. For example, the range of student backgrounds is likely to be narrower in an isolated small town than in a metropolitan area. Hypothetically, the small town school would have less choice than its big city counterpart.

Our point is simply that the concept of elitism is very complex, and difficult—though not impossible—to measure. This brief excursion provides some background for the analysis that follows.

## ***What Conditions Promote Inequitable Access to Charter Schools?***

It is possible that deregulation has adverse effects on the ability for schools to serve at-risk students. Historically, regulations have been enacted to prevent or correct social inequalities, such as racial segregation and neglect of children with physical disabilities. Therefore, deregulated school choice plans that are not targeted toward children who are at risk could accentuate social stratification (Tyack, 1990).

It also is reasonable to expect that in a stratified society, some communities and individuals will be in a better position than others to participate in choice programs (Peterkin & Jackson, 1994). The conventional public school system is highly stratified, but the marketplace, too, can be indifferent to the needs of certain people—in particular to low-income people and others who traditionally have been underserved (Daniel, 1993). In the absence of corrective measures, advantaged communities tend to be in a better position to benefit from deregulation than are communities with fewer private resources and parents who have less education and expertise, less time to donate, and less political influence. There is therefore always the possibility that deregulated charter school programs will inadvertently promote more inequality within communities (e.g., see Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Wells, Hirshberg, & Datnow, 1994). Opponents of charters, accordingly, maintain that the most advantaged families will be selected, leaving schools from which they depart economically and socially worse than they were (Elmore, 1986; Lee & Croninger, 1994; Wells, 1993a).

Speaking broadly of schools operating in a deregulated, free market system, Wells and Crain (1992) predict that granting parents the option to choose schools will lead to more racial, ethnic, and economic segregation and stratification. Wealthy White families, the reasoning goes, have the advantage of more time, information, education, influence, connections, and money; while people who are lower in the status hierarchy do not compete because of intimidation, distrust, and resistance (see also Fine, 1993). In support of the thesis, some studies show that, so far at least, relatively few low-income parents actually opt for choice when it is available, and moreover, the participating parents tend to be relatively more advantaged, better educated, have fewer children, are more involved in their children's education, and are more ambitious for their children (Wells, 1993b; Whitte, 1993). Preliminary research on the implementation of charter school legislation in the Los Angeles Unified School District reinforces the authors' belief that more attention must be given to equity issues in charter schools (Wells, Hirshberg, & Datnow, 1994).

Lee and Croninger (1994) advance the argument that, by providing a vehicle for only a few marginally disadvantaged parents to obtain a better education for their children, choice increases social stratification *within* disadvantaged communities. They take the untenable position that, in fairness to those who do not participate, such programs should be discontinued. However, their reasoning seems to us arbitrary in that it would prevent marginally disadvantaged families from enjoying choices that advantaged parents have always had, without acknowledging the countless families who already have escaped from low-income neighborhoods via precisely the same decisions. A less arbitrary tack would seek to provide the means and incentives necessary to extend choices to all disadvantaged families, perhaps by targeting choice programs to at-risk families.

### *What Conditions Promote Equal Access to Charter Schools?*

Are charter schools really elitist? Federal and state laws prohibit discrimination based on disability, race, creed, color, national origin, ancestry, or need for special education services.

California's charter law further stipulates that charter schools "shall not discriminate against any pupil on the basis of ethnicity, national origin, gender, or disability," and requires applicants for a school to describe the means by which they will achieve a racial and ethnic balance among pupils that is reflective of the general population residing within its territorial jurisdiction. A strong case can be made that charter schools are serving traditionally underserved populations. In stark contrast to the literature just cited, charters have been promoted as an option for poor families who otherwise have few opportunities to escape poorly financed or mismanaged school systems and little power to induce change (Coons & Sugarman, 1978; Jencks, 1966). Research showing strong support for choice among socially disadvantaged adults seems to support this view (Coleman, Schiller, & Schneider, 1993; Strate & Wilson, 1991). For example, using group-level measures of residents in Detroit, Lee and Croninger (1994) found that favorable opinion on choice is highly correlated with lower district resources, lower social class standing, and minority composition.

In principle at least, charter schools can enroll a wide range of students from outside traditional school and district boundaries. California law specifies that admission to a charter school cannot be based on the student's residence. In practice however, open enrollment is limited by the stipulation that converted schools should give preference to students from the former attendance area. Nevertheless, in 1993, the first year charter schools operated in California, only 40% of the schools were giving priority to students in a specific attendance area. About one third drew at least some students from throughout their sponsoring districts, and another third recruited some students from neighboring districts (Dianda & Corwin, 1994, p. 41). Moreover, new-start schools are not constrained by attendance areas in the way converted schools are, and in any case certainly, teachers and parents are free to create schools that are specially targeted to the needs of at-risk student populations. Therefore, potentially, charter schools can fill voids in school districts by providing special programs for dropouts, second-language learners, academically borderline students, and also gifted students from families who are at risk due to poverty, racial and cultural backgrounds, and language barriers.

### *About This Analysis*

In the following analysis, we address the question of how accessible California charter schools are to traditionally underserved populations of students, using estimates of students' demographic characteristics that were provided by administrators of the charter schools and comparison schools. Because we did not expect that administrators would always be informed of the precise distributions, they were instructed to make estimates within broad ranges (e.g., between 0-19%, 20-49%).

Five types of charter schools were distinguished for purposes of a preliminary analysis: (a) K-8 schools ($N = 38$); (b) high schools ($N = 4$); (c) special programs for low academic achievers ($N = 3$); (d) home schools ($N = 5$); and (e) schools that were still planning and not yet in operation ($N = 3$)[7]. On the basis of inspection, we concluded that the patterns for high schools are not distinctively different from K-8 schools, except that they enroll lower percentages of students who are below national norms on tests. Schools with special programs tend to enroll slightly lower percentages of students who are LEP, need special education, or are above national norms on tests. These schools enroll higher percentages of students who have been retained in grade. However, by comparison, home schools and new schools differ most systematically from the K-8 schools. Therefore, in the following analyses, the five home schools are compared to the other schools (K-8, high schools and special programs).

We emphasize that, because of the small sample size, many of the observed differences are not statistically significant. For each of the nine variables we analyzed, a chi square was computed between the total charter school sample and the comparison sample. Statistical significance reached the $p>.05$ level three times, $p>10$ in three instances, and $p>.20$ in one analysis. Tests that were not substantially significant could mean that there is a high probability that the observed differences do not apply to the total population. It also could be a statistical artifact of the sample size. In either case, however, the data reported in the figures are useful because they can:

- demonstrate the incidence of particular facts (e.g., that a certain number of schools exist which enroll very few minorities, or that enroll many);
- reveal trends, such as schools in which at-risk students are uniformly underrepresented on a variety of different measures;
- illuminate patterns that could be valid and therefore merit closer scrutiny; and
- suggest hypotheses for further study.

For purposes of this analysis, we have identified several family background characteristics of the students as proxies for the social status levels served by each school, and several proxies for the students' level of academic performance. These variables will be considered, separately and together, as evidence for or against elitism, as discussed above. For each student characteristic, we address the following questions.

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[7] The $N$ refers to the number of schools responding to at least one of the questions on student demographics.

1. Is there evidence of elitism within the sample of charter schools?

To answer this question, we compare patterns of similarities and differences between charter schools and the comparison schools, asking whether they are either composed of privileged students, or do not include students who traditionally have been underserved.

2. Are there systematic differences in the students enrolled in various types of charter schools?

The variety of forms among charter schools argues against treating them as a single reform. At least, one must be cautious about sweeping generalizations that "paint all charters with the same brush." To illustrate this point, we have singled out *home schools* and *new schools* to demonstrate some of this variability. We again emphasize that, because there are only a few such schools in our sample, this analysis can only serve to illustrate that variability exists; it cannot provide conclusive evidence about differences in the population of charter schools.

3. Are charter schools providing distinctive forms of *leadership* in serving to underserved students?

This last question postulates a visionary hope that often is used to justify educational reforms, namely that in the long run the movement will produce exemplary schools devoted to serving all students, including those who historically have been underserved. While it may be unfair to burden this fledgling movement with visionary ideals, we suspect that criticisms of charter schools sometimes stem from their failure to live up to demanding standards not usually applied to other schools, rather than what they are accomplishing in the face of onerous challenges. This issue is considered further in the concluding discussion.

## Analysis

The following analysis will first consider family background variables and measures of students' academic performance.

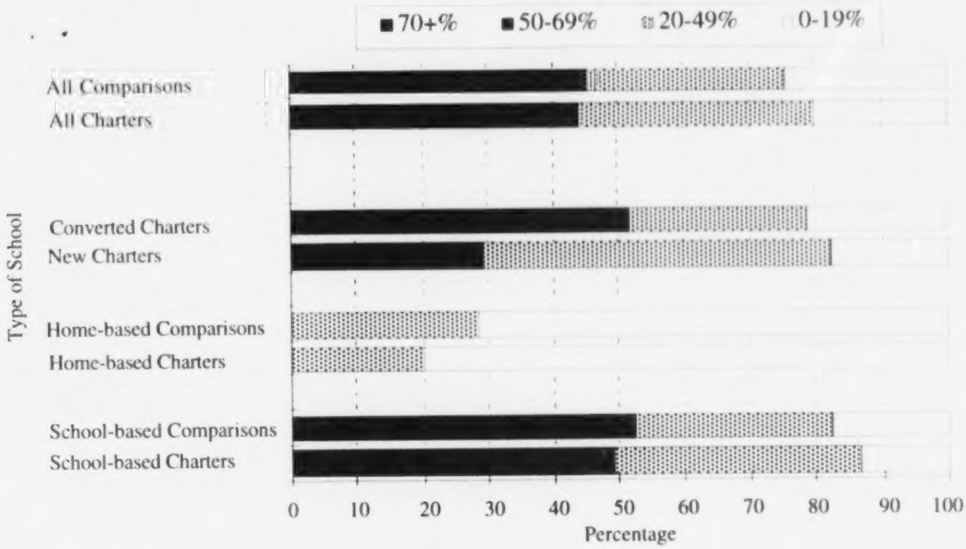
### *Do Charter Schools Serve Students From a Broad Range of Family Backgrounds?*

To assess the social status of students enrolled in each school, administrators were asked to estimate the percentage of their students in each of the following categories who: (a) are members of racial or ethnic minorities; (b) qualify for free/reduced-price meals; (c) reside with families that have professional or managerial occupations; and (d) are LEP.

*Charters Resemble Comparison Schools in Minority Composition*

The data do not support the hypothesis that charter schools are less racially balanced than nearby comparison schools. Figure 35 reports percentages of students who are members of racial and ethnic minorities enrolled in home schools, other charter schools, and comparison schools. The figure reveals no striking pattern of differences between the total sample of charter schools and the comparison sample ($p < .89$). In slightly under one half of both samples (44-45%), most students have minority backgrounds. In about one third of them, more than 70% of the students are minorities. Moreover, there are not many charters where fewer than one in five students has a minority background; only one in five charters enrolls fewer than 20% minorities.

**Figure 35**
*Percentage of Students From Racial or Ethnic Minorities: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



*Differences—home schools.* The figure does suggest, however, that in comparison to classroom-based schools, home schools are less likely to enroll high concentrations of minorities. In four of the five home schools that responded to this question, fewer than one fifth of the students are members of racial or ethnic groups; whereas only 13% of the school-based charters enroll this few. This represents a 67% difference (6:1 ratio). Indeed, in about one half of the other charters, the majority of students have minority backgrounds, and in nearly one third, 70% or more are minorities.

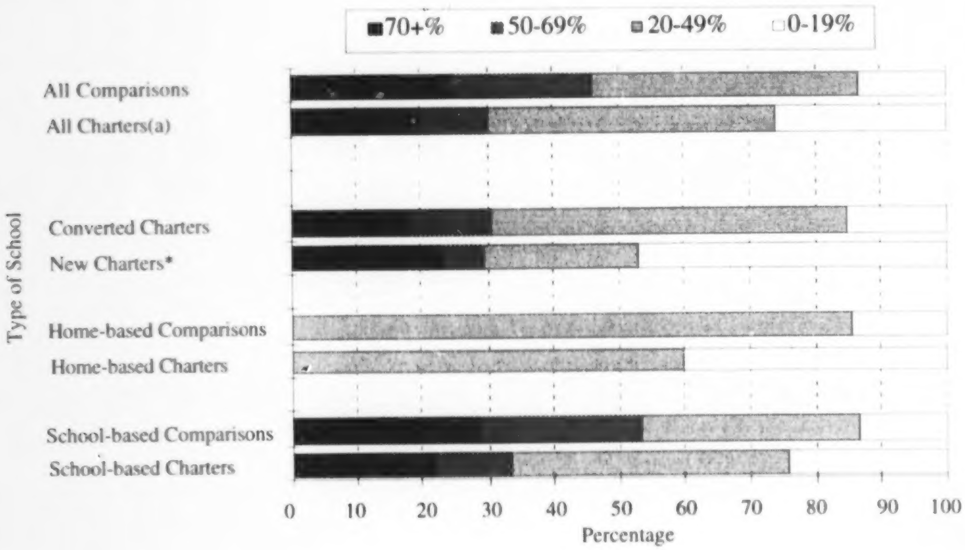
*Differences—new schools.* In the same figure, new schools are compared to existing schools that converted to charter status. Again, the figure demonstrates variability in enrollments in the two types of schools. By a ratio of 3 to 1, converted schools more often report very high concentrations of minorities (70%+) (25% difference). In about one half of the converted schools, the majority of students are members of minorities; whereas fewer than one half have minority backgrounds in 70% of the new schools.

*Leadership.* There is no support for the charge that charter schools, as a whole, are inaccessible to racial-ethnic minorities, although they may have less access to home schools and newly created schools than to converted, classroom-based schools. However, it appears that the charter school movement has not yet fully realized one of its greatest opportunities: namely to promote more racial and ethnic diversity *within* schools. In nearly one in every four charter schools, the overwhelming majority of students are minorities whose classmates also are minorities. The fact that charters are no different from comparison schools is in some respects laudable—especially because many charter schools lack access to the state's desegregation funding programs. But this does not speak to their potential for providing more workable models of racial integration. Still, the very diversity of the movement may provide new models. For example, in new schools, which generally enroll fewer minorities, the racial balance hovers between 20% and 49%. This kind of balance represents a promising pattern that may point the way to more racially balanced charter schools in the future.

### *Charters Enroll Fewer Low-Income Students Than the Comparison Schools*

While charter schools are not exclusive White enclaves, they tend to enroll fewer low-income students than the comparison schools in our sample. Comparison schools enroll more students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals than do charter schools (see Figure 36). The chi square level of significance is $p < .09$ when variables are dichotomized and $p < .22$ for the full figure. Students from low-income homes predominate in one third of the charters (see the two patterns on the left side of the bar chart). In the vast majority, fewer than one half are poor (see the two patterns on the right side of the bar chart). In twice as many charters as their comparisons, fewer than 20% of the students come from low-income families (13% difference; 2:1 ratio). There is a 16% differential between the number of charters that have predominately low-income students and their counterparts (30% vs. 46%; 1.5:1 ratio).

**Figure 36**
*Percentage of Students Qualifying for Free/Reduced Meals: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



* p < .05 (a) p < .10

*Differences—home schools.* This tendency for charters to underserve the economically less privileged students is accentuated in the five home schools in the sample. Although most home schools do enroll substantial numbers of low-income students, in contrast to the other schools, low-income students do not constitute a majority in any home school; whereas, they are the majority in one third of the classroom-based charters (33% difference).

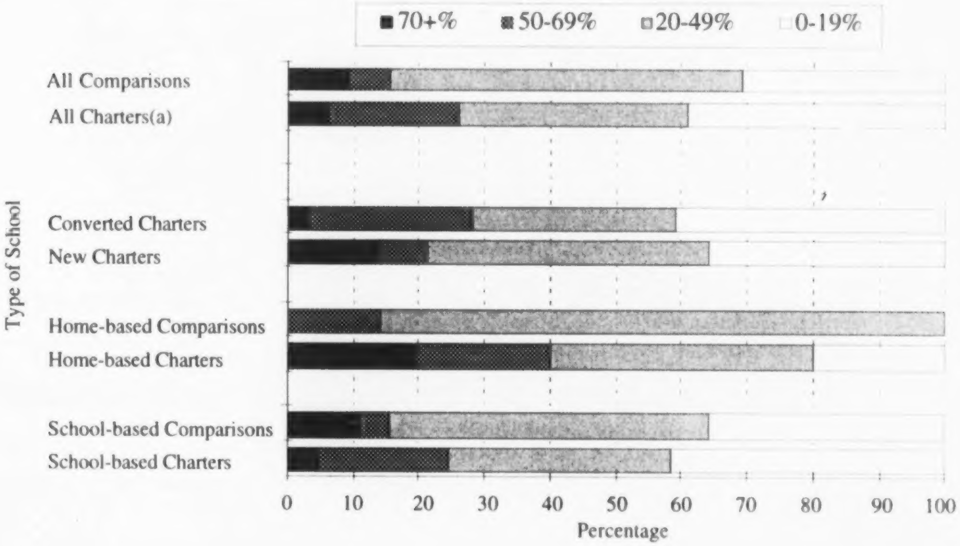
*Differences—new schools.* Converted charter schools enroll higher concentrations of low-income students than new schools, and hence skim less, on this parameter (p < .05). In almost one half of the new schools (47%), low-income students constitute under 20% of the student body, compared to only 15% of the converted schools with this few (32% difference; 3:1 ratio).

*Leadership.* If there is any foundation to the concern that charter schools are skimming, it may be with respect to social status selectivity. Although substantial proportions of both school-based and home schools serve large concentrations of low-income students, charter schools have not yet assumed leadership in serving this type of underserved student. While the difference is not large, it appears that proportionately more comparison schools are serving larger concentrations of students from poor families. These data suggest that the potential in the movement for redressing the neglect of low-income families is not being realized. This conclusion, however, will be qualified in the discussion section that follows.

*Students From More Privileged Families Tend To Be Overrepresented in Charter Schools*

Corresponding to the relative underrepresentation of low-income students in charters, students from more privileged families tend to be overrepresented in comparison to their counterparts (p < .09). Figure 37 shows that schools with a preponderance of students from professional families are found almost twice as often among charter schools as among their nearby comparisons (26% vs. 15%; 11% difference; 1.7: ratio) (see the first two patterns on the left side of the bar chart).

**Figure 37**
*Percentage of Students Residing With Professional Families: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



(a) p < .10

*Differences—home schools.* Home schools have higher concentrations of upper-status students than classroom-based charter schools. For example, 40% of the home schools, compared to one fourth of the classroom-based schools, are predominated by students from professional families (15% difference; 1.6:1 ratio). And, twice as many classroom-based charters have fewer than one in five students from professional families (42% vs. 20%; 22% difference; 2:1 ratio).

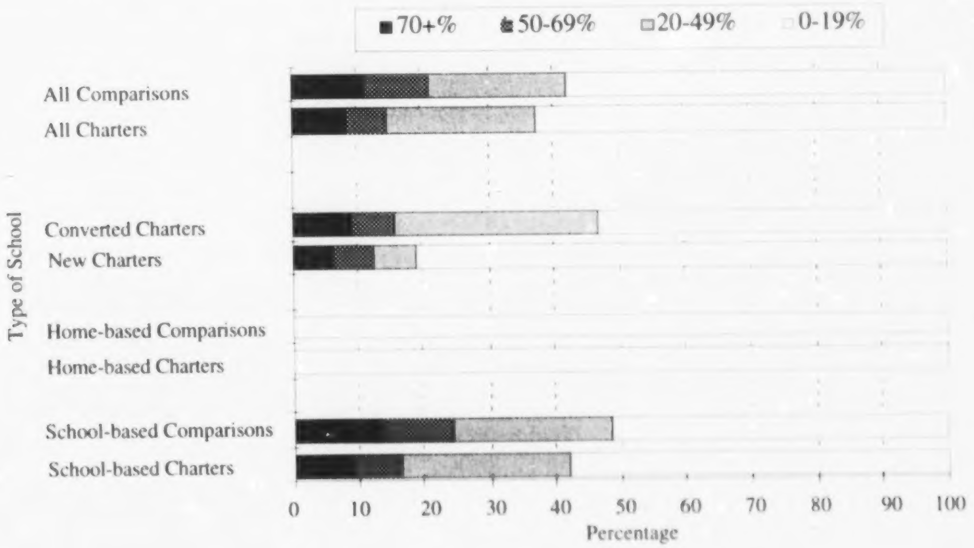
*Differences—new schools.* New and converted schools do not differ much on this characteristic. Students from professional families predominate in 21% of the former and 28% of the latter (7% difference; 1.3:1 ratio).

*Leadership.* There is a distinct possibility that charter schools lag behind many other schools in service to low-income students. However, while perhaps they can be faulted on this score, it also is important to acknowledge they are not skimming to the extent their critics have suggested. The open enrollment policy of charter schools opens the door to selective recruitment of students from high-income, well-educated families. While some of that may be happening, there is no evidence of an overwhelming takeover of charters by privileged parents. In this sense, charter schools are an exemplary demonstration that a market-driven reform need not necessarily result in creaming only the educationally advantaged students.

### *Charters Are Serving Fewer English Language Learners, But the Difference Is Small*

There is little, if any, support for the possibility that charter schools are skimming off only the students who already have learned the English language. Figure 38 suggests that charters may be slightly less inclined than their counterparts to serve English language learners, but the difference is small ($p < .86$; dichotomized, $p < .39$). LEP students predominate in only slightly more comparison schools than charters (21% vs. 15%; 6% difference; 1.4:1 ratio). In the majority of both samples, fewer than one in five students is classified as LEP.

**Figure 38**
*Percentage of Students Who Are LEP: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



*Differences—home schools.* Home schools are more vulnerable to accusations about selectivity because none of the five home schools enroll as many as one in five LEP students (42% difference when compared to classroom-based charters).

*Differences—new schools.* New and converted schools also differ impressively on this variable. New schools are more selective. In the vast majority of them (81%), fewer than one in five students is learning the English language whereas nearly one half of the converted schools (47%) enroll higher percentages (28% difference; 1.5:1 ratio).

*Leadership.* Regardless of whether or not charter schools may be underserving LEP students, we do not see evidence to suggest they are taking the lead in focusing on language minorities. In a state where this challenge is most pressing, there is a desperate need for leadership with this problem.

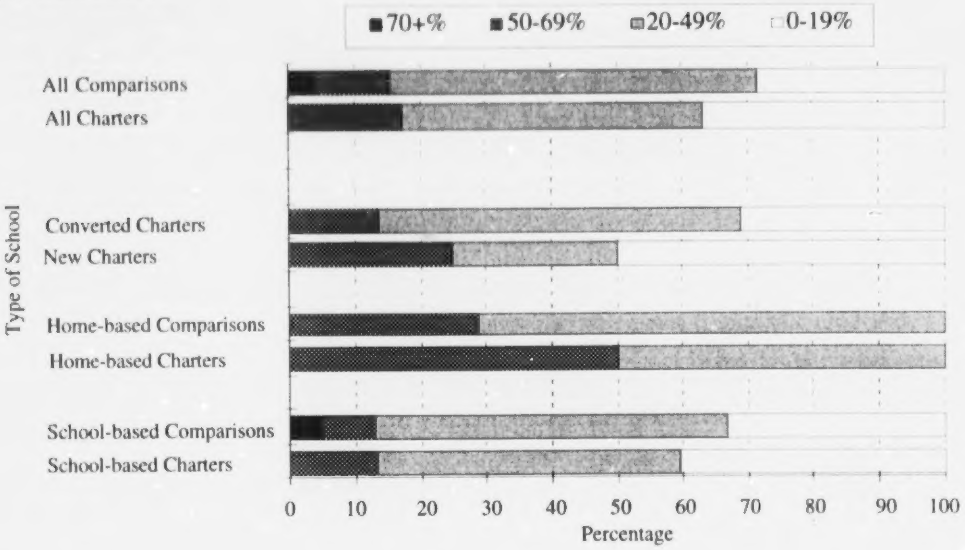
### ***Are Charter Schools Serving Students With a Broad Range of Academic Ability?***

Administrators were asked to estimate percentages of their students who: (a) are one or more years above the national norm on standardized tests; (b) are one or more years below the national norm on standardized tests; (c) qualify for special education placement; (d) were retained in grade at least once; and (e) are currently or formerly school dropouts.

#### *Charters Are Not Targeting Above-Average Students*

Figure 39 does not support the hypothesis that charter schools are targeting only the best students ($p < .35$). There is no distinctive difference between charters and their comparison counterparts in the percentages of schools enrolling a majority of students who are one or more years above national norms on standardized tests (17 vs. 15%; 2% difference; 1:1 ratio). In fact, comparison schools may tend to outrank charters in the number enrolling more than one in five students with high scores (63% vs. 72%; 9% difference; 1:1 ratio).

**Figure 39**
*Percentage of Students One or More Years Above National Norms: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



*Differences—home schools.* Chartered home schools appear to be more selective than classroom-based charters. The home school charters are more likely than their counterparts to be made up predominantly of high academic performers. Most students are above the national average in only five of the classroom-based schools (14%), compared to two of the four home schools (50%) (37% difference; 3.7:1 ratio). Moreover, in 41% of the former, fewer than one in five students has high scores; but no chartered home school has so few of these students (41% difference; 0:1 ratio).

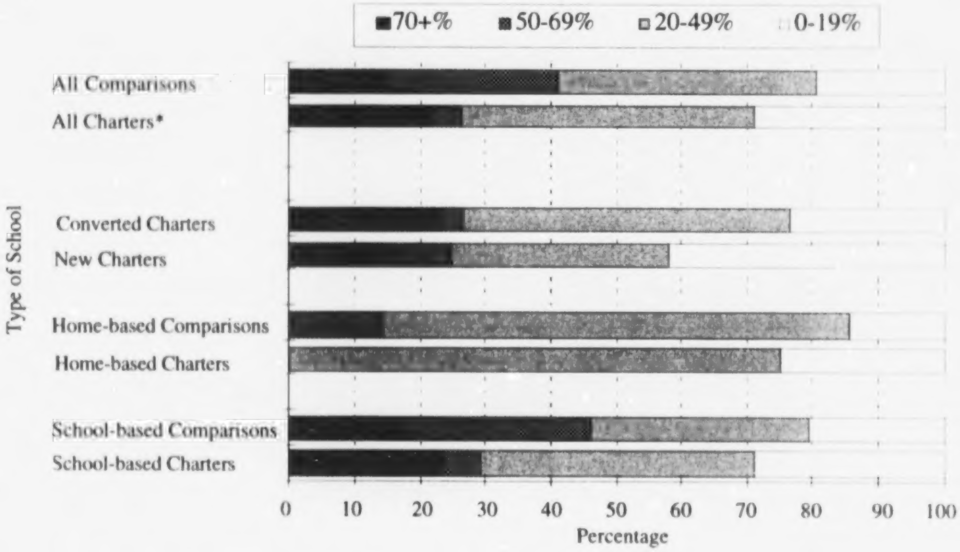
*Differences—new schools.* High concentrations of above-average students are slightly more likely to be enrolled in converted schools than in new schools, but the percentage difference is small. For example, in 14% of the converted schools, most students are high academic achievers, compared to 25% of the new schools (11% difference; 1.8:1 ratio). There is a corresponding 20% difference in the proportion of schools made up of fewer than 20% of above-average students.

*Leadership.* Even though charter schools have the power to select high achievers, it does not appear that they are being formed primarily to serve the best students, and in that sense, they may be regarded as exemplary.

*Charter Schools Serve Fewer Below-Average Students Than Comparison Schools*

Although perhaps charters are not creaming the best students, are they skimming off students who are one or more years below national norms on standardized tests? Figure 40 provides reliable support for this possibility ($p < .05$). Clearly, charter schools are not made up predominately of low achievers, and they do not serve the relatively high concentrations of such students found in the comparison schools. In 41% of the comparison schools, the majority of students are below average. For charter schools, the comparative figure is 26% (15% difference; 1.6:1 ratio). The respective percentages of charter and comparison schools enrolling fewer than one in five below-average students are 29% versus 20% (9% difference; 1.5:1 ratio).

**Figure 40**
*Percentage of Students One or More Years Below National Norms: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



* $p < .05$

*Differences—home schools.* Classroom-based charters tend to have higher concentrations of below-average students than home schools. In 29% of the school-based charters, the majority have low scores, but no chartered home school has a majority (29% difference; 0:1 ratio).

*Differences—new schools.* There are lower concentrations (under 20%) of below-average students in new schools than in converted schools (42% vs. 23%; 18% difference; 1.8:1 ratio).

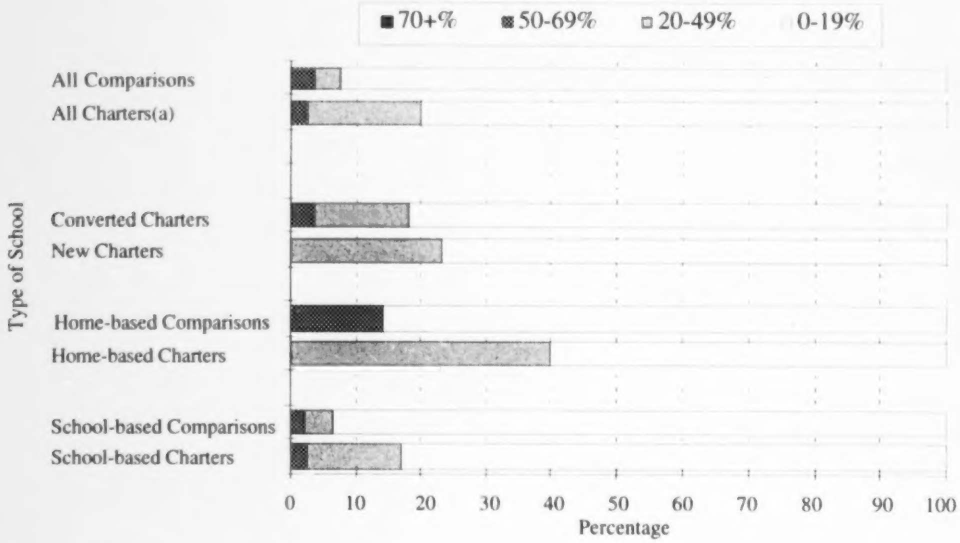
*Leadership.* According to the Charter Schools Act of 1992, one intention of the California legislature was that charter schools would "increase learning opportunities for all pupils, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving." The data on this particular measure of academic performance do not support the expectation that charter schools are concentrating on low achievers. Other nearby schools seem to be carrying more of that challenge than are charters.

On the other hand, while charters may not be exceptional in this regard, it is important to recognize that they are not totally neglecting low achievers, who constitute the majority of students in one in five charters in our sample. Indeed, there are a few more charters than comparison schools composed of very high concentrations of below-average students (70% or more) (5% of difference). Moreover, other measures of academic performance suggest that charter schools are serving low achievers, which we shall consider next.

### *Charters Are Serving More Failing Students Than Comparison Schools*

The data suggest that charter schools are serving more students who are failing in school than the comparisons (see Figure 41; $p < .09$). In one in five charters, more than 20% of the students have been retained in grade, which is more than double the rate of the comparison schools (12% difference; 2.6:1 ratio).

**Figure 41**
*Percentage of Students Who Have Been Retained in Grade at Least Once: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



(a) p < .10

*Differences—home schools.* Home schools also enroll higher percentages of failing students than classroom-based schools. Two of the five chartered home schools in the sample (40%) report that more than one in five students have been retained in grade. This rate exceeds the classroom-based schools by 23% (2.4:1 ratio)

*Differences—new schools.* There is only a 5% difference in the proportion of new and converted schools in which over 20% of the students have been retained in grade (77% vs. 82%).

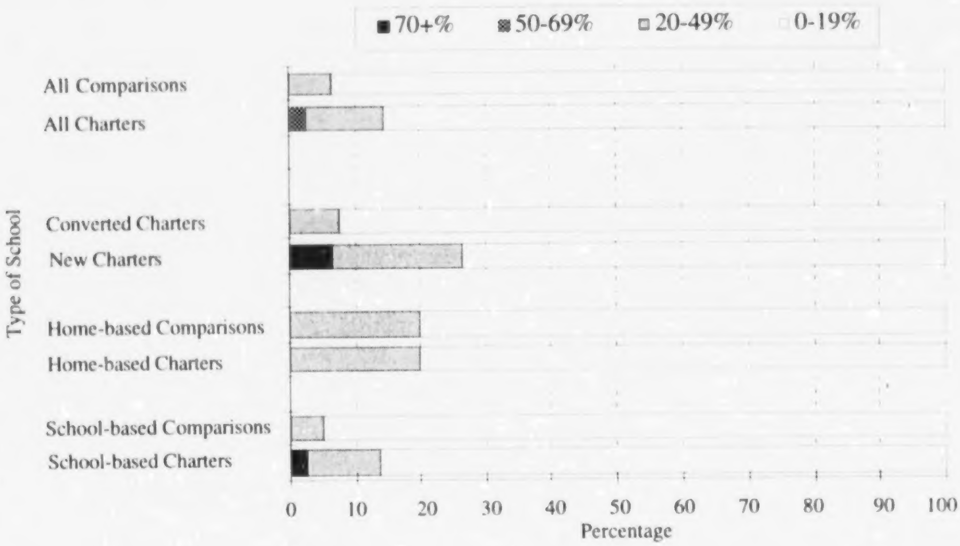
*Leadership.* In contrast to the pattern of underserving below-average students as a whole, there is reason to believe that charters excel in service to failing students. It appears these charter schools may disproportionately serve students who have been retained in grade, and thus living up to the expectation that they would target low academic achievers.

### *Charters Are Serving Dropouts*

This conclusion is reinforced when students who are dropouts or former dropouts are considered. It is possible that charter schools are serving relatively high numbers of students with high dropout rates (see Figure 42, p < .38). Although the chi square is not significant, there is a

2:1 ratio in favor of charter schools in the percentage of schools with more than 20% dropouts (15% vs. 7%; 8% difference; 2:1 ratio).

**Figure 42**
*Percentage of Students Who Are Current or Former Dropouts: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



*Differences—home schools.* Home schools also are somewhat more likely to report more than 20% dropouts than are classroom-based charters (20% vs. 14%; 6% difference; 1.4:1 ratio).

*Differences—new schools.* New schools also enroll more dropouts than converted schools. In 27% of the former, at least one in five students is a dropout; only 8% of the converted schools serve dropouts at this rate (19% difference; 3.5:1 ratio).

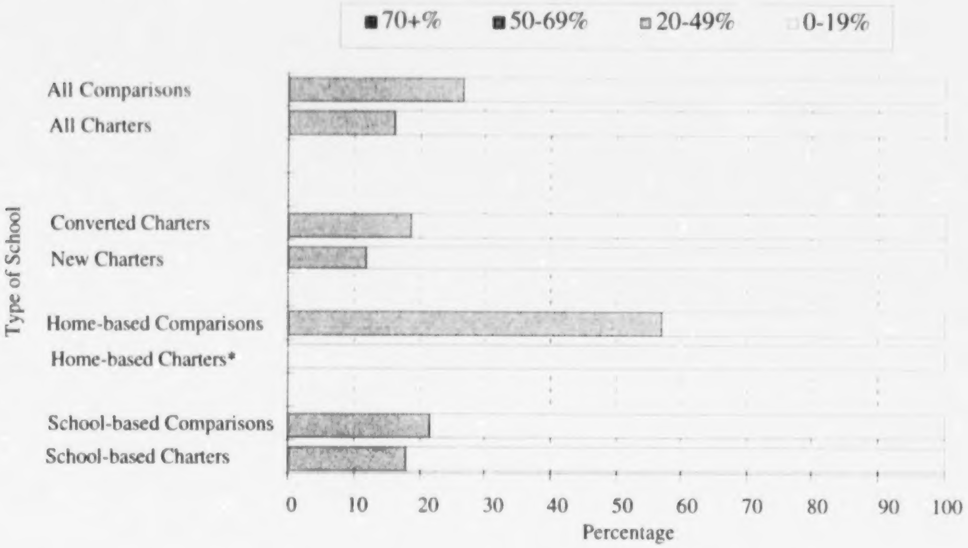
*Leadership.* Charter schools, especially new ones, may be outperforming their nearby counterparts with respect to providing service to students who are currently, or have been, dropouts.

### *Charters Are Not Targeting Special Education Students*

There is modest support for the possibility that charter schools are underserving special education students (see Figure 43, $p < .21$). One in five students qualifies for special education placement in one fourth of the comparison schools, and in 16% of the charter schools (10% difference; 1.7:1 ratio).

**Figure 43**

*Percentage of Students Qualifying for Special Education Placement: Charter Schools Versus Comparison Schools*



* p < .05

*Differences—home schools.* Some classroom-based charters serve relatively high percentages of special education students, whereas chartered home schools do not. Only 16% of the charter schools in our sample report more than 20% special education students, and all of them are classroom-based schools. (It is worth noting that while none of the five chartered home schools report more than 20% special education students, more than one half of their seven counterpart home school comparisons do.)

*Differences—new schools.* New schools are slightly less likely than converted schools to serve high percentages of special education students (19% vs. 12%; 7% difference; 1.6:1 ratio).

*Leadership.* In some states, charter schools seem to be filling niches by enrolling high percentages of students needing special help. Although some charter schools in California fit this pattern, California charters have not yet assumed distinctive leadership in this area.

## Summary and Discussion

Two types of student background characteristics were analyzed in this chapter: family backgrounds and academic performance.

### *Family Backgrounds*

*Minorities*

The hypothesis that racial and ethnic minorities will not have access to charter schools is not supported by our data. On the contrary, most charter schools serve high concentrations of minorities. More than one fourth of the charters enroll very high concentrations of minorities, a pattern that conforms to that present in the comparison schools. This evidence does not support the critics' fears that charter schools are inaccessible to minorities.

However, it is important to keep in mind that there are many types of charter schools serving a highly segmented market of students and parents. This diversity of schools carrying the charter school label permits one to find examples to fit some of the fears and criticisms surrounding the charter school movement. In this respect, we find that most home schools and a half-dozen K-8 charters may not be serving high concentrations of minorities. However, they are not typical. The fact that the profiles of the non-chartered home schools nominated by chartered home school administrators (i.e., the comparisons) match the chartered home schools reinforces our interpretation that their clientele is a product of their mission rather than their charter status.

*Social Status*

There is support for the possibility that, compared to other nearby schools, charter schools underserve low-income students.

In one in four charters, there are relatively few low-income students, with meaningful percentage differences between them and our comparison schools. In particular, home schools do not serve large concentrations of low-income students, and clearly, new schools serve lower concentrations of low-income students than do converted schools.

Corresponding to the relative underrepresentation of low-income students in charters, students from more privileged families seem to be slightly overrepresented in comparison to their counterparts. Home schools have higher concentrations of upper-status students than classroom-based charter schools.

However, this pattern does not by any means imply that charters are inaccessible to low-income students. In 30% of them, a majority of students are from low-income families. Even one fourth of the new schools, which tend to serve fewer low-income students, are composed predominantly of such students, and the majority enroll relatively large proportions (i.e., over 20%).

It is crucial to recognize that many charter schools must overcome enormous obstacles before they can exert forceful leadership on this issue. For one thing, as already mentioned, California law stipulates that converted schools must give preference to pupils who reside within the former attendance areas. This restriction may help explain why converted schools in low-income neighborhoods do not enroll more low-income students, but it does not explain why many new schools have not targeted them.

A more formidable obstacle is associated with the ecological distribution of charter schools, which was documented in our previous survey (Dianda & Corwin, 1994). Most charter schools in California seem to be located in small towns, where charter school leaders meet less resistance, compared to metropolitan areas. Thus, on the one hand, the leaders who are successful in launching new schools are frequently located in areas remote from high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students. On the other hand, those who are surrounded by such students have to meet other types of staggering challenges just to get a school started.

### *LEP Students*

Charters are only slightly less inclined than their counterparts to serve English language learners; the difference is small, and a high percentage of classroom-based charter schools are serving LEP students.

In 38% of all charters, at least one in five students is classified as LEP. In California, approximately one in five students is classified as LEP. Using that figure as a benchmark, it could be concluded that charter schools are serving more than their share of LEP students. However, most of these are converted schools. Whereas LEP students are overrepresented in close to one half of the converted schools, they are underrepresented in all home schools and in most new schools. It does not appear that home schools and new schools are being formed in response to the enormous need in California for help with English language learners.

## *Academic Performance*

### *Above Average Students*

Our data do not support the hypothesis that charter schools are targeting only the best students. If anything, charter schools may be enrolling relatively few of the better students. However, home schools seem to be selectively recruiting the better students. They are more likely than classroom-based charters to recruit high concentrations of above-average students. In contrast to the four chartered home schools in this sample, a large percentage of classroom-based charters have relatively few high-performing students. Also, new schools seem to be more selective than converted schools.

### *Below-Average Students*

Below-average students seem to be underrepresented in charter schools. Although not creaming the best students, charter schools seem to be underserving students who are one or more years below national norms on standardized tests, at least to some extent. Home schools are not focusing on low academic performers. They are less likely than classroom-based charters to recruit high concentrations of below-average students. Low academic performers do not constitute a majority of students in any of the four chartered home schools in this sample, whereas they are a majority in 30% of the mainstream charters. This pattern tends to be slightly more characteristic of converted schools than new schools.

### *Students Retained in Grade*

Charter schools are serving students who are failing in school. In one in five charters, more than 20% of the students have been retained in grade, which is three times the rate of the comparison schools (7%). However, only two of the five chartered home schools (40%) enroll retained students at that rate. Even so, their record is better than non-chartered home schools. The difference between new and converted schools is small.

### *Student Dropouts*

Charter schools also serve students who have high dropout rates. While the absolute percentage difference is small, there is a 2 to 1 ratio, in favor of charter schools, in the percentage of schools with more than 20% dropouts (14% vs. 7%). New schools, in particular, enroll more dropouts than converted schools. In 27% of the former, at least one in five students is a dropout;

only 8% of the converted schools serve dropouts at this rate. Thus, charter schools, especially new ones, are out-performing their nearby counterparts with respect to providing service to students who are currently, or have been, dropouts.

### *Special Education*

Charter schools may be underserving students special education students, but much of the difference can be attributed to the selectivity of home schools. Our estimates on the percentage of students who are classified as needing special education are not very discriminating because there are relatively few schools in which the student body is made up of more than 20% special education students. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that such students may be underrepresented in chartered home schools on two counts: (a) in comparison to classroom-based charters and (b) in comparison to other nearby home schools. While not conclusive, this pattern lends further support to the possibility that chartered home schools are more selective than other charter schools.

## *Profile*

Some of these conclusions are summarized in Table 15.

**Table 15**
*Is There Evidence of Elitism?*

| | | Charter school subpopulations | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total sample | Classroom - based schools | Home schools | New schools | Converted schools | Leadership |
| Minorities | No | No | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Low income | Some | Some | Yes | Yes | No | No |
| Privileged | Possibly | Possibly | Some | No | No | Some |
| LEP | No | No | Yes | Possibly | No | No |
| Above average | No | No | Yes | Possibly | No | No |

*table continues*

| | | Charter school subpopulations | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Total sample | Classroom - based schools | Home schools | New schools | Converted schools | Leadership |
| Below average | Possibly | Possibly | Yes | Possibly | No | No |
| Special education | Possibly | No | Yes | Possibly | No | No |
| Retained | No | No | No | No | No | Yes |
| Dropouts | No | No | No | No | No | Yes |

*Note.* Conclusions are based on the difference ratios reported in the preceding discussion, as follows: Yes = 3:1- 6:1; Some = 2:1-3:1; Possibly = 1.5-2:1; No = 1.4 or less.

### ***Conclusions***

The data suggest to us five conclusions.

*First*, the data underscore our point that determining the existence of elitism is remarkably complex and whether charter schools are "elitist" cannot be glibly answered with a simple yes or no. Many types of charter schools are being created to serve an extremely segmented market of students and parents. This diversity yields examples to fit the criticisms, as well as confirming the high hopes associated with the charter school movement.

*Second*, there is faint and mixed evidence that, in comparison to their nearby counterparts, charter schools *possibly* tend to skim students who (a) come from low-income families, (b) have below average test scores, and (c) qualify for special education. In addition, they are *possibly* creaming students from privileged families. We emphasize that, at best, these are only tendencies, and they are not statistically significant. However, these patterns do illuminate the need for further analysis of these characteristics because it is precisely the at-risk, underserved students that potentially could benefit the most from attending a charter school.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the tradeoffs reflected in the figures. For example, charter schools enroll minorities at the same rate as comparison schools, and they are serving dropouts and students who have been retained in grade at double the rate of comparison schools. However, there is a preponderance of these students in only 15-20% of the charter schools.

*Third*, in any case, we do not think the data substantiate the sensational charge that charter schools in California are either creaming the most able, privileged students or as a group, skimming out those who traditionally have been underserved. Certainly, as a group, they are not oases of White, privileged, above-average students. Indeed, the racial and ethnic distributions of charter schools are not different from their counterparts. Moreover, they do serve large concentrations, and substantial concentrations of underserved students, even though at lower rates than comparison schools. Moreover, one half dozen of schools enroll exemplary numbers of students who are most at risk of failing or dropping out of school.

*Fourth*, on the other hand, certain types of charter schools are less accessible than others to underserved, at-risk children. Many forms of charter schools are being created to serve a gamut of purposes and familiars. In particular, although there are only a few home schools in our sample, they consistently overrepresent above-average students from more privileged backgrounds and underrepresent below-average, low-income, racial-ethnic, and language minorities. Still, they do serve all types of students, though in lower concentrations than classroom-based charters, and significantly, they reach more dropouts and students who have been retained in grade than other schools.

New schools also have a mixed record, in that in comparison to converted schools, they are less accessible to low income, racial-ethnic minorities, and possibly to LEP and special education students, and students who are below average. On the other hand, they enroll more retained students and dropouts than converted schools.

*Fifth*, with the major exceptions of reaching more dropouts and retained students than the comparison group, we are forced to the conclusion that most charter schools are not setting path-breaking examples for serving low-income minorities who are below-average students or who require special education. It may seem unfair to hold them to higher standards than other schools that are not doing any better at serving at-risk, underserved students. But we are compelled to confront the issue of leadership because the euphoria that drives reform movements tends to generate visionary hopes that a new program will provide models for solving a wide spectrum of problems. Consequently, new programs tend to be measured against idealistic standards not usually demanded of conventional institutions, as well as against what already exists.

We suspect that criticisms of charter schools sometimes are based on confusion between these two standards of comparison. Charter schools can be regarded as exemplary, in the sense that they are not much different than their counterparts, even though they have every opportunity to select students. However, they are sometimes held accountable for higher standards, and then criticized for not being better than other schools. This tendency to hold out high expectations has the advantage of setting goals for the movement and generating enthusiasm and political support. At the same time, it seems to us unreasonable to hold all charter schools, at this stage of their development, responsible for providing leadership on some of the society's toughest problems. Some of the extreme obstacles they have to overcome in order to survive and function have been well-documented (see Dianda & Corwin, 1994). Still, we can always hope that the diversity of schools in the movement will ultimately provide new models and the kind of leadership that is so desperately needed.

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